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US edition

The Guardian

Friday 16 December 2022
theguardian.com/us
Published in New York, United States



▲ *A resident rides his bike through street barricades in Bakhmut, Ukraine. Photograph: Chris McGrath/Getty Images*

Putin preparing major offensive in new year, Ukraine defence minister warns

Isobel Koshiw and Peter Beaumont in Kyiv

Senior Ukrainian officials say Vladimir Putin is preparing for a major new offensive in the new year, despite a series of humiliating battlefield setbacks for Russia in recent months.

In an interview with the Guardian, Ukraine's defence minister, Oleksii Reznikov, said that while Ukraine was now able to successfully defend itself against Russia's missile attacks targeting key infrastructure, including the energy grid, evidence was emerging that the Kremlin was preparing a broad new offensive.

Reznikov's comments echoed similar remarks made to the Economist this week – including from the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, the head of the armed forces, Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and the chief of ground forces, Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskii.

The briefings appeared to be part of a broad, coordinated effort to warn against complacency among western allies and highlight the continuing threat Russia poses to Ukraine.

While Reznikov suggested a new offensive could happen by February, the other senior officials indicated they believed it might come as early as January.

Referring to Russia's partial mobilisation of about 300,000 soldiers, Reznikov suggested that while half – often after receiving minimal training – were being used to reinforce Moscow's forces after a series of battlefield setbacks, the remainder were being prepared more thoroughly for future offensives.

"The second part of the mobilisation, 150,000 approximately, started their training courses in different camps," said Reznikov, speaking of Russia's mobilisation drive, which started in October.

"The [draftees] do a minimum of three months to prepare. It means they are trying to start the next wave of the offensive probably in February, like last year. That's their plan."

The warnings come amid evidence of Putin's continuing desires to continue the war into next year, including missile procurement efforts from Iran, and analysis by Russian commentators suggesting that the Kremlin sees no way of retreating from the conflict.

Reznikov said he expected Russia would continue to mobilise its citizens beyond the current partial mobilisation, describing the main tactic of Russian commanders as a "meat grinder" whereby they throw as many bodies at a battle as possible in the hope they will overwhelm the smaller Ukrainian force.

"The Kremlin is trying to find new solutions [for] how to get the victory," said Reznikov. In the Economist, Gen Zaluzhnyi delivered a similar warning, discounting some western claims that Putin's mobilisation had largely been a failure.

"Russian mobilisation has worked," said Zaluzhnyi. "They are 100% being prepared." He added that a major new Russian attack could come "in February, at best in March and at worst at the end of January".

In another briefing on Thursday, the deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar also warned against allowing complacency to set in after recent Russian military setbacks.

"We and the world should not relax, because the ultimate goal of the Russian Federation is to conquer all of Ukraine, and then it can move on," Maliar said.

The assessment that Russia may be preparing a new large-scale campaign against Ukraine in the coming months runs counter to intelligence briefings and recent analysis that has suggested the tempo of the war – and Russian efforts – will slow through the depths of the Ukrainian winter.

With Ukrainian troops being trained in a number of western countries, and arriving foreign-trained soldiers being seeded in units across the country, Reznikov said Ukraine's hybrid tactics, well-trained troops and the wishlist of weapons it hopes to receive from allies, would enable it to withstand fresh attacks.

"If it was meat grinder against meat grinder, we would lose. It was a mistake to perceive us as a small Soviet army

Continued *on page 2*

VISIT…

LANZAROTE Caliente.com

Continued from page 1

[that] will fight a big Soviet army. Certainly, a big Soviet army would win and a small Soviet army would lose but we are not a Soviet army."

Speaking hours after another mass drone attack on Kyiv on Wednesday, when Ukraine's air defence said it shot down all 13 drones that were launched, Reznikov said he believed Ukraine was now winning against Russia in the air.

Russia began targeting Ukrainian energy facilities on a regular basis in the autumn after Moscow's forces were pushed out of Kharkiv and the Crimean Bridge attacked.

The aim was to debilitate Ukraine to increase the chances of success on the battlefield. However, since then, Ukraine has shown increasing skill in shooting down rockets and drones.

Reznikov said Ukraine's air defence systems had increased their efficiency from 50% at the beginning of the war to 80% in December. He also gave the example of the previous barrage on 5 December, when Ukraine shot down 60 out of 70 rockets fired by Russia.

Ukraine has also been appealing for new weapons systems including better air defences, even as it appears to have escalated its targeting of bases in Russia, including with drones, strikes Reznikov declined to comment on.

Ukraine was using a combination of air defence systems gifted by its partners, Soviet-era systems and repurposed mobile machine guns to combat the threat, said Reznikov. On Tuesday, CNN reported that US officials had agreed to send Ukraine powerful and effective US-made Patriot air defence systems that Ukraine has been asking for for months.

The US had previously worried the long-range Patriot defence systems, which can travel up to 60 miles, would provoke an escalation from Russia.

Ukraine has had to constantly prove to its partners that it is worth investing in its military through wins on the battlefield. Reznikov gave the example of how Ukraine sank the Moskva warship with a Ukrainian-made Neptune system in April and how each win has led to more supplies. "When we used a Ukrainian invention, the Neptune, and we sank the warship Moskva … after that, we get [US-made] Harpoons to defend our sea line," he said.

The series of wins had created something that transcended diplomatic trust between Ukraine and its partners, said Reznikov.

"It's something more: you became the believer of us and you started to invest, not only, I would say, not only weapons in Ukraine, [but] because you want to see the new Ukraine after this victory, not the old Soviet Ukraine."

The UK and other western allies are in the process of training thousands of Ukrainian troops, from novices, to specialising those who are already experienced soldiers. Reznikov claims that Russia, meanwhile, is "only using Soviet systems and training courses".

The comments came as fighting continued on the southern and eastern fronts. In the south, Russian shelling on Thursday killed two people in the city of Kherson and left it without power, Ukrainian officials said, in the latest bombardments since Kyiv recaptured the city last month.

The deputy head of the president's office, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, said on social media that Russian forces had shelled the city centre.

Family of Uvalde victim urge Congress for tougher gun laws: 'When is enough enough?'

Maya Yang

The sister of one of the young victims killed in the Uvalde school shooting earlier this year, as well as the city's only pediatrician, pleaded for stricter gun laws during a congressional hearing on gun violence on Thursday.

The hearing, titled "Examining Uvalde: The Search for Bipartisan Solutions to Gun Violence", was hosted by the House of Representatives committee on the judiciary in Washington.

At the hearing, Faith Mata, whose 10-year-old sister, Tess, was killed on 24 May during the shooting at Robb elementary school along with 18 other students and two teachers, urged lawmakers to consider tougher gun control.

"It hurts. I lost my better half," said Mata. "We will never know how scared she was in that last classroom."

"Are we not tired of hearing the stories of victims, hearing from victims' families? Are we not tired of hearing yet another tragedy because of gun violence? When is enough enough?" the 21-year-old pleaded to lawmakers, recounting how her family waited for more than eight hours to discover that her younger sister had been killed.

"This debatable topic on assault rifles should not be brought up again because someone else's child or sibling was murdered. It's just an excuse at this point," she said.

Uvalde's only pediatrician, Roy Guerrero, who treated many of the slain students also testified at Thursday's hearing.

"These kids weren't helpless victims that day. They were spunky, intelligent, street-smart kids … But with a weapon like [the AR-15], [they] had no chance," he said.

"You might mistakenly imagine a funeral where a child dies peacefully in a colorful coffin. But make no mistake, there's no peace in the death of a child by a weapon of war," he added, explaining how one of the slain children he saw at the hospital was decapitated while the other had a gunshot wound so large, he could nearly put his entire hand through their chest.

As a gun owner and a doctor, Guerrero said that he believes in the second amendment but called upon lawmakers to consider stricter control on assault rifles.

"They're not appropriate for self-defense in a home, in the school or in the supermarket. They are and always have been designed as a military-grade killing machine," he said.

Texas state senator Roland Gutierrez also appeared at the hearing where he condemned the police response to the shooting as one of "the worst" in American history.

According to a report from the Texas legislature, nearly 400 law enforcement agencies showed up at the scene after the shooting began but were stymied by a lack of coordination.

"Policymakers, you and I have to grapple with how much loss of life is acceptable in relation to someone's freedom to obtain and carry a weapon that can inflict so much damage," Gutierrez said.

"A child was dragged out of the hallway, her face was gone. Hallways and classrooms and blood like no horror movie you've ever seen," he said. "Off-camera, you could hear grown men throwing up from the sight of the horror or perhaps the failure that they had caused."

Democratic House representative Sheila Jackson Lee who chaired Thursday's hearing called for a ban on AR-15-style weapons, saying that without it, "more people will die".

"If we're not going to ban them, then law enforcement must be trained to confront these weapons of war. Yes, we must train law enforcement like warriors in a battle on the combat field," she said.

Jackson Lee also criticized Republicans for not supporting the various proposals previously put forth by Democrats to reduce gun violence such as red flag laws and raising purchasing age limits.

"I'm angry. Legislators are not supposed to be enraged. We are simply supposed to stand with stoic faces and let witnesses put their souls on the table … None of you should have to tell your stories," she said.

Meanwhile, Republican House representative Andy Biggs pushed back against Jackson Lee, arguing that more focus needs to be directed towards the mental health of potential perpetrators.

"There hasn't been an honest engagement and search for bipartisan solutions to gun violence, mostly because there's only one solution for my friends across the aisle and that is to emasculate the second amendment and remove guns from legal, lawful and law-abiding citizens," Biggs said.

Ex-Texas officer convicted of manslaughter for shooting Atatiana Jefferson

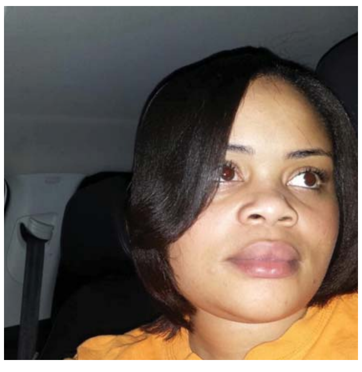
Staff and agencies

A former Texas police officer was convicted of manslaughter Thursday for fatally shooting a Black woman through a rear window of her home in 2019, a rare conviction of an officer for killing someone also armed with a gun.

Jurors were also considering a murder charge against Aaron Dean but instead convicted him of manslaughter in the death of Atatiana Jefferson. The conviction comes more than three years after the white Fort Worth officer shot the 28-year-old woman while responding to a call about an open front door.

Dean, 38, faces up to 20 years in prison on the manslaughter conviction. He had faced up to life in prison if convicted of murder. The judge told jurors Wednesday that they could also consider a manslaughter charge.

The Tarrant county jury returned the verdict after more than 13 hours of deliberation over two days. That followed six days of testimony and arguments in which the primary dispute was whether Dean knew Jefferson was armed when he shot her. Dean testified that he saw her weapon; prosecutors alleged the evidence showed otherwise.


▲ *Jefferson was with her nephew playing video games the night she was shot. Photograph: AP*

The case was unusual for the relative speed with which, amid public outrage, the Fort Worth police department released video of the 12 October 2019 shooting and arrested Dean. He'd completed the police academy the year before and quit the force without speaking to investigators.

Since then, the case had been repeatedly postponed amid lawyerly wrangling, the terminal illness of Dean's lead attorney and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dean shot Jefferson after a neighbor called a non-emergency police line to report that the front door to Jefferson's home was open. She had been playing video games that night with her nephew and it emerged at trial that they left the doors open to vent smoke from hamburgers the boy burned.

Police body camera footage showed that Dean and a second officer who responded to the call didn't identify themselves as police at the house. Dean and Officer Carol Darch testified that they thought the house might have been burglarized and quietly moved into the fenced-off backyard looking for signs of forced entry.

There, Dean, whose gun was drawn, fired a single shot through the window a split-second after shouting at Jefferson, who was inside, to show her hands.

Dean testified that he had no choice but to shoot when he saw Jefferson pointing the barrel of a gun directly at him. But under questioning from prosecutors he acknowledged numerous errors, again and again conceding that actions he took before and after the shooting were "more bad police work".

Darch's back was to the window when Dean shot, but she testified that he never mentioned seeing a gun before he pulled the trigger and didn't say anything about the weapon as they rushed in to search the house.

Dean acknowledged on the witness stand that he only said something about the gun after seeing it on the floor inside the house and that he never gave Jefferson first aid.

Jefferson's eight-year-old nephew Zion Carr was in the room with his aunt when she was shot. Zion testified that Jefferson took out her gun believing there was an intruder in the backyard.

Recounting the day of the killing, Zion said in court: "I was confused, because I didn't know if … it was a dream and I wasn't waking up still." At one point when the defense lawyer was questioning him, he responded: "I don't like talking about what happened."

This kind of conviction is exceedingly rare, with few officers facing criminal charges for on-duty killings. And when officers are prosecuted for murder or manslaughter, estimates suggest only 50% are found guilty.

Despite mass protests against police killings in 2020 and efforts at reforms, officers in the US continue to kill an average of roughly three people a day. The Washington Post's records suggest the number of police killings has continued to increase in recent years.

Harvard names Claudine Gay as the first Black president of university

Maya Yang and agencies

Harvard University announced on Thursday that Claudine Gay will become its 30th president, making her the first Black person and the second woman to lead the Ivy League school.

Gay, who is currently a dean at the university and a democracy scholar, will become president on 1 July. She replaces Lawrence Bacow, who is stepping down to spend more time with family.

A child of Haitian immigrants, Gay is regarded as a leading voice on the issue of American political participation. In 2006, she joined Harvard as a professor of government and of African and African American studies and has since explored a variety of issues, including how a range of social and economic factors shape political views and voting.

Gay is also is the founding chair of Harvard's inequality in America initiative, which studies issues like the effects of child poverty and deprivation on educational opportunity and American inequality from a global perspective.



▲ *On 15 December, Claudine Gay became the first African American to serve as president of Harvard University. Photograph: Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard University/AFP/Getty Images*

"She is a terrific academic leader with a keen mind, great leadership and communication skills, excellent judgment, and a basic decency and kindness that will serve Harvard well," Bacow said in a statement. "Perhaps most importantly, she commands the respect of all who know her and have worked with her."

Penny Pritzker, senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation and chair of Harvard's presidential search committee, echoed similar sentiments, saying, "Claudine is a remarkable leader who is profoundly devoted to sustaining and enhancing Harvard's academic excellence, to championing both the value and the values of higher education and research, to expanding opportunity, and to strengthening Harvard as a fount of ideas and a force for good in the world."

In her acceptance speech, Gay called for greater collaboration among schools at Harvard and said there was an urgency for the university to be more engaged with the world and to "bring bold, brave and pioneering thinking to our greatest challenges".

"The idea of the 'ivory tower' – that is the past, not the future of academia. We don't exist outside of society, but as part of it," she said. "That means that Harvard has a duty to lean in, engage and to be of service to the world."

With Gay's appointment, women will outnumber men as chiefs of the eight Ivy League schools. Dartmouth and the University of Pennsylvania appointed women earlier this year, joining Brown and Cornell. Columbia, Princeton and Yale are led by men.

Gay will be the only Black president currently in the Ivy League and the second Black woman ever, following Ruth Simmons, who led Brown University from 2001 to 2012.

Libyan PM admits government role in sending Lockerbie bomb suspect to US

AP in Tripoli

One of Libya's rival prime ministers has admitted that his government was involved in the extradition to the US of a former Libyan intelligence officer accused of making the bomb that downed Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing all onboard.

US authorities announced on Sunday they had arrested former intelligence officer Mohammed Abouagela Masud . The next day, Mas'ud appeared at federal court in Washington and was charged with an act of international terrorism. US officials did not explain how he was taken into their custody.

In a televised broadcast on Thursday evening, Libya's prime minister, Hamid Dbeibah, said Masud's extradition was lawful and his government was simply cooperating with an "international judicial framework to extradite accused citizens". It was his first comment on the extradition.



▲ *Mohammed Abouajela Masud was charged in a federal court on Monday with an act of international terrorism. Photograph: Ismail Zetouni/Reuters*

In 20-minute speech, Dbeibah named Masud as the bombmaker for the Lockerbie attack that killed 270 people and said that Libya "had to wipe the mark of terrorism from the Libyan people's forehead". He provided no hard evidence for any of his allegations and did not elaborate on his government's role in Masud's handover.

The US and Libya have no formal extradition agreement.

A day before, Libya's chief public prosecutor, Saddiq Al-Sour, had announced there would be an investigation into Masud's extradition following a complaint from the suspect's family. The Tripoli-based prosecutor provided no details about the investigation.

Masud was "kidnapped" from his family home in Tripoli by armed men in November, according to a statement issued by his family shortly after the alleged incident. It was unclear if any of the family witnessed Masud's alleged abduction.

In that statement, the family condemned Libyan authorities for their silence over the incident and for any extradition process that could later take place.

Engulfed by over a decade of civil conflict, Libya is divided between the government of Dbeibah in Tripoli and a rival government based in eastern Libya headed by prime minister Fathi Bashagha. In western Libya, militia groups have accumulated vast wealth and power from kidnappings and their control over the country's lucrative human trafficking trade.

On Tuesday, Bashagha called Masud's extradition illegal and urged his immediate release.

Masud's extradition has added to discontent among Libyans, long frustrated by years of chaos and division. In Facebook videos posted Thursday, people in Tripoli were seen carrying posters that blamed Dbeibah and his allied militia forces for Masud's extradition. In statements broadcast Thursday, two of Libya's influential tribal groups also condemned the move.

The New York-bound Pan Am flight exploded over the Scottish town of Lockerbie after taking off from London on 21 December 1988, killing 259 people onboard and 11 on the ground. Among the dead were 190 American citizens.

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'Losing the plot': Trump mocked after announcing superhero card collection

Martin Pengelly in New York



▲ Donald Trump. Photograph: Andrew Harnik/AP

Donald Trump walked into a comic-book universe of internet mockery on Thursday, when in a carefully trailed announcement he introduced his "official Donald Trump Digital Trading Card" collection with a picture of himself in superhero costume, cape and "Trump Champion" belt.

"Just when you thought this grifter couldn't humiliate himself any more than he already has," wrote John Kiriakou, a CIA whistleblower turned author, "there's this. THIS is what the big announcement was."

On Wednesday, Trump used his Truth Social media platform – set up after he was thrown off Twitter for inciting the Capitol attack – to trail a "major announcement".

In what with hindsight appeared a clue that the forthcoming announcement might not be in the traditionally dignified vein of statements from former presidents, that video featured Trump saying "America needs a superhero" over an animation of himself standing outside Trump Tower, ripping open his suit to reveal a superhero costume and shooting lasers from his eyes.

Some social media users thought Trump might announce a bid to be speaker of the US House, an outlandish if theoretically possible gambit pushed by some rightwing Republicans.

Others wondered if Trump was attempting to ape the "Dark Brandon" internet meme, in which Joe Biden – who beat Trump resoundingly at the ballot box in 2020 – is shown as a super-competent comic book figure with laser vision.

But when the announcement came on Thursday, Trump said he was merely offering supporters "limited edition cards featur[ing] amazing ART of my Life & Career", which he promised would prove "very much like a baseball card but hopefully much more exciting".

"GET YOUR CARDS NOW!" the 76-year-old former president commanded, above the picture of himself standing in a ring for boxing or wrestling, muscles rippling under a red leotard and wearing high blue boots emblazoned with "45" (his presidential number) and an American flag as a cape.

The cards, the declared candidate for the Republican nomination in 2024 said, cost "Only $99 each" and "would make a great Christmas gift".

"Don't Wait," Trump added. "They will be gone, I believe, very quickly!"

Trump's need for funds has increased recently, amid unprecedented legal jeopardy over his business and political affairs.

He has also taken a battering in polls regarding the GOP nomination in 2024, slipping behind the Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, in surveys carried out by USA Today, CNN and the Wall Street Journal.

On Thursday, amid widespread mockery, Santiago Mayer, executive director of Voters Tomorrow, wrote: "Donald Trump's major announcement is that he's selling his own Pokémon cards."

Ginger Gibson, senior Washington editor for NBC Digital, wrote: "Donald Trump's 'major announcement' appears to be that he still thinks people will give him $99 when he asks."

Sarah Rumpf, a contributing editor to Mediate, a media watchdog, said: "This is somehow hilariously dumber than even I had expected."

Philip Bump, a Washington Post columnist, said Trump was "losing the plot".

Rick Wilson, of the anti-Trump Lincoln Project, said: "Major Trump embarrassment, more like, amirite?"

Men sentenced to prison for supporting plot to kidnap Michigan governor

Associated Press in Jackson, Michigan



▲ Paul Bellar, left, Pete Musico and Joe Morrison were convicted of providing material support of a terrorist act. Photograph: J Scott Park/AP

A judge on Thursday handed down the longest prison terms so far in the plot to kidnap the Democratic governor of Michigan, sentencing three men who forged an early alliance with a leader of the scheme before the FBI broke it up in 2020.

Joe Morrison, Pete Musico and Paul Bellar were not charged with direct roles in the conspiracy but were members of a paramilitary group that trained with Adam Fox, who separately faces a possible life sentence on 27 December.

The trio were convicted in October of providing material support for a terrorist act, which carries a maximum term of 20 years, and two other crimes.

Musico was sentenced to a minimum of 12 years in prison, followed by his son-in-law Morrison at 10 years and Bellar at seven. They will be eligible for parole after serving those terms.

In a recorded video, the governor, Gretchen Whitmer, urged the judge to "impose a sentence that meets the gravity of the damage they have done to our democracy".

"A conspiracy to kidnap and kill a sitting governor of the state of Michigan is a threat to democracy itself," said Whitmer, adding that she now scans crowds for threats and worries "about the fate of everyone near me".

The judge, Thomas Wilson, presided over the first batch of convictions in state court, following the high-profile conspiracy convictions of four others in federal court.

Fox and Barry Croft Jr were described as captains of an incredible plan to snatch Whitmer from her vacation home, seeking to inspire a US civil war known as the "boogaloo".

Whitmer, recently elected to a second term, was never physically harmed. Undercover FBI agents and informants were inside Fox's group for months and the scheme was broken up with 14 arrests in October 2020.

A person convicted of more than one crime in Michigan typically gets prison sentences that run at the same time. But Wilson took the unusual step of ordering consecutive sentences for Musico and Morrison, making their minimum stays longer.

In addition to being convicted of supporting terrorism, the three men were each convicted of a gun crime and of being a member in a gang.

Musico, 45, Morrison, 28, and Bellar, 24, were members of the Wolverine Watchmen. The three held gun training with Fox in rural Jackson county and shared his disgust for Whitmer, police and public officials, especially after Covid-19 restrictions disrupted the economy and triggered armed Capitol protests and anti-government belligerence.

But defense attorneys argued that the trio cut ties with Fox before the Whitmer plot came into focus by late summer 2020. Bellar had moved to South Carolina in July. The three men also didn't travel with Fox to look for the governor's second home or participate in a key training session inside a "shoot house" in Luther, Michigan.

"Mr Bellar is clueless about any plot to kidnap the governor," the attorney Andrew Kirkpatrick said in a court filing last week.

A jury quickly returned guilty verdicts in October after nine days of testimony, mostly evidence offered by a pivotal FBI informant, Dan Chappel, and federal agents.

Separately, in federal court in Grand Rapids, Fox and Croft face possible life sentences in two weeks' time. Two men who pleaded guilty received substantial breaks: Ty Garbin is free after a two-and-a-half-year prison term while Kaleb Franks was given a four-year sentence.

Brandon Caserta and Daniel Harris were acquitted by a jury.

When the plot was foiled, Whitmer blamed then president Donald Trump, saying he had given "comfort to those who spread fear and hatred and division".

In August, after 19 months out of office, Trump said the kidnapping plan was a "fake deal".

Stress of legal action against Mail on Sunday caused Meghan's miscarriage, Harry claims

Caroline Davies

The Duke of Sussex has claimed the stress of the Duchess of Sussex's privacy action against the Mail on Sunday caused her to miscarry.

The prince also revealed his brother screamed and shouted at him during the fraught Sandringham summit that led to the couple quitting the UK and royal duties.

The prince claimed palace wars had left him heartbroken, suggesting Prince William's office deliberately briefed against him and Meghan, despite a promise the brothers had made not to copy the same tactics allegedly used by Charles's office.

In the final three episodes of the Netflix documentary Harry & Meghan, Harry said of Meghan's successful legal action against the Mail on Sunday and Mail Online over publication of parts of her private letter to her estranged father, Thomas Markle.

"I believe my wife suffered a miscarriage because of what the Mail did. I watched the whole thing. Now, do we absolutely know that the miscarriage was caused by that – course we don't," he said.

"But bearing in mind the stress that caused, the lack of sleep and the timing of the pregnancy – how many weeks in she was – I can say from what I saw, that miscarriage was created by what they were trying to do to her."

Speaking of the bitterness caused throughout the process of the couple's departure as working royals, Harry said: "I mean, the saddest part of it was this wedge created between me and my brother so that he's now on the institution's side – and I get, part of that I get. I understand, right? That's his inheritance, so to some extent it's already ingrained in him that part of his responsibility is the survivability and the continuation of this institution."



▲ *Harry and Meghan at the Invictus Games in The Hague, Netherlands, in April. Photograph: Peter Dejong/AP*

In private video footage, Harry is seen sharing a text with Meghan from William, shown immediately after footage in which William denied the royal family were racist after the Oprah Winfrey interview. Meghan reacted with "wow" as she looked at the screen, then hugged Harry, as he said "I wish I knew what to do".

In other revelations, Harry claimed a joint statement was put out without his permission in his and William's name on the day of the summit denying a story that William had bullied him out of the royal family.

"No one had asked me permission to put my name to a statement like that. I rang M and I told her and she burst into floods of tears, because within four hours they were happy to lie to protect my brother, and yet for three years they were never willing to tell the truth to protect us."

Recounting what went on behind the scenes at Sandringham in January 2020, Harry said: "It was terrifying to have my brother scream and shout at me and my father say things that just simply weren't true, and my grandmother quietly sit there and sort of take it all in."

The allegations were aired as senior members of the royal family were preparing to attend the Princess of Wales's carol service at Westminster Abbey on Thursday evening.

Both Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace declined to comment on the claims.

In a direct attack on Kensington Palace, Harry said: "William and I both saw what happened in our dad's office, and we made an agreement that we would never let that happen to our office."

But, he said, the relationship between the royals and the press was "a dirty game".

"I mean, just constant briefings about other members of the family, about favours, inviting the press in."

He said if the palace communications team for one royal "want to be able to remove a negative story about their principal [royal boss], they will trade and give you something else about someone else's principal, so the offices end up working against each other".

He added: "I would far rather get destroyed in the press than play along with this game, this business of trading … to see my brother's office copy the very same thing that we promised the two of us would never, ever do, that was heartbreaking."

His comments imply William and Kate's aides briefed against the couple, as Meghan speaks of how she thought of taking her own life after a barrage of negative press coverage.

She said: "It was like all of this will stop if I am not here. And that was the scariest thing about it. It was such clear thinking."

Harry said he was "devastated" and felt "angry and ashamed" things got to that stage saying: "I dealt with it as an institutional Harry as opposed to husband Harry," which he now hated himself for.

Meghan said she "wanted to go somewhere to get help, but I wasn't allowed to. They were concerned about how that would look for the institution".

As footage of newspaper headlines about Kate and Meghan flashed on screen, including pictures of the two women touching their baby bumps when pregnant, Harry contrasted the coverage. "If you don't see the difference and understand why it's being reported in that way, or why, then I can't help you, I'm sorry, I just can't."

Problems between the palaces had begun when Meghan began receiving more coverage than other royals, the couple claimed.

"The issue is when someone who is marrying in and should be a supporting act is then stealing the limelight, or doing the job better than the person who was born to do this. That upsets people. It shifts the balance," said Harry.

As coverage of Meghan then became increasingly negative, Harry said: "No one would have private conversations with the editors saying 'Enough'". He said he spoke to Charles. "My dad said to me: 'Darling boy, you can't take on the media. The media will always be the media.' I said: 'I fundamentally disagree.'"

He denied "blindsiding" the Queen over announcing the couple's plans to move to Canada, and accused "the institution" leaking a letter about their plans to the press.

He also claimed the couple were at Tyler Perry's house in California in 2020 for six weeks before anyone knew, adding: "My family still thought I was in Canada."

Florida pastor and son arrested in alleged $8m Covid relief fraud scheme

Gloria Oladipo

A Florida pastor and his son have been arrested for allegedly fraudulently obtaining more than $8m in federal Covid relief funds.

Evan and Joshua Edwards of Orlando were arrested on Wednesday, alleged to have used such funds for luxury expenses including a multimillion-dollar house near Walt Disney World.

"I'm glad they got arrested," a neighbor told NBC News, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It's a long time coming."

The father and son, both from Canada, face charges including conspiracy to commit bank fraud, the Daytona Beach News-Journal reported.



▲ *Evan and Joshua Edwards of Orlando were arrested on Wednesday. Photograph: Daniel Buitrago Ch./Getty Images/EyeEm*

The Edwards are Christian missionaries who ran a faith-based organization, Aslan International Ministry, with the expressed purpose of communicating "Christian love in doctrine and service to the poor".

After doing missionary work in Turkey, the family moved to Florida in 2019, settling about an hour outside Orlando.

Federal prosecutors now allege that beginning in April 2020, the Edwards family committed fraud by submitting a fraudulent loan application to the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) which said the family ministry had 486 employees and a monthly payroll of $2.7m.

According to a complaint released by the Department of Justice, the family used the funds to purchase a home in Golden Oak, a Four Seasons Private Residence.

Funds were transferred into family bank accounts "in an attempt to hide and conceal their whereabouts", the complaint said.

Federal agents attempted to search the Golden Oak home in September 2020 but found it empty. The family were then pulled over in their Mercedes SUV, NBC reported. Police found bags containing shredded documents, financial records and electronic devices placed in "Faraday bags", to block radio frequencies and prevent tracking.

The family was taken into custody on an immigration charge but released the next day when the case was dismissed. In April 2021, a judge ordered the forfeiture of the $8.4m the family fraudulently received. The family did not contest the seizure.

Evan and Joshua Edwards were taken into custody five months after NBC published details of the scam and its attempted cover-up.

FTX ally warned authorities days before Bankman-Fried arrest

Alex Hern

One of the closest lieutenants of FTX founder, Sam Bankman-Fried, warned Bahamian regulators about improper trades at the cryptocurrency exchange in the days running up to its collapse, according to court filings.

The revelation came in papers published as part of the bail hearing for Bankman-Fried, FTX's former chief executive, who was arrested in the Bahamas on Monday and charged in the US on Tuesday over alleged fraud, money laundering and conspiracy.

The filing refers to a warning from Ryan Salame, the co-CEO and chairman of FTX Digital Markets, the Bahamian-based portion of Bankman-Fried's sprawling cryptocurrency empire, about transfers to FTX's crypto hedge fund, Alameda Research.

On 9 November, Salame told the Bahamian securities commission that "clients' assets which may have been held with FTX Digital were transferred to Alameda Research to cover financial losses at Alameda", according to the court documents first published by the Financial Times.

In the filing, published as part of Bankman-Fried's bail hearing, Christina Rolle, the commission's director, added that Salame was clear only three people could have made the transfer: Bankman-Fried or his two co-founders, Nishad Singh and Gary Wang. "Such actions may be deemed criminal," Rolle concluded.



▲ Sam Bankman-Fried is escorted out of the magistrate court building after his arrest, in Nassau, Bahamas on December 13. Photograph: Dante Carrer/Reuters

The conversation between Rolle and Salame happened two days before FTX filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in the US, and the same day that Binance, the largest cryptocurrency exchange, walked away from a non-binding offer to bail out the company after performing brief due diligence.

Salame has long been one of Bankman-Fried's closest associates, just outside the innermost circle of the FTX co-founders. While Bankman-Fried built up a reputation as a mega-donor for the Democratic Party, using his newfound influence in Washington DC to push for friendly regulation, Salame was doing the same with the Republicans, ultimately giving more than $20m to various causes within the party.

Those donations are now under the spotlight, after criminal charges filed against Bankman-Fried in New York include campaign finance violations and money laundering offences.

According to the Department of Justice's allegations, customer funds deposited at FTX were funnelled to Alameda, where they were then used to make political donations in both Bankman-Fried's name and the names of other un-named "co-conspirators".

Since the collapse of FTX, Bankman-Fried has publicly maintained that he was largely absent from day-to-day decisions at Alameda, and has blamed the transfer of funds between the two companies on an oversight of a "hidden, poorly labelled internal account" containing $8bn that FTX's internal records had failed to mark as being actually held in the name of the crypto hedge fund.

But while Bankman-Fried stepped down as chief executive of Alameda in 2021, with his former hedge fund colleague and sometime girlfriend, Caroline Ellison, eventually taking over as sole chief executive the following year, civil charges filed by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission allege that he "maintained direct decision-making authority over all of Alameda's major trading, investment, and financial decisions".

The charges add: "This authority was exercised at least in part through Bankman-Fried's regular, often daily participation in various in-person and mobile chat communications with senior personnel at Alameda."

Parents battle to recoup special education services lost to Covid

Linda Jacobson

Marissa Sladek knew her son Christopher had fallen far behind when she bought him a copy of Jack London's The Call of the Wild. The movie had opened just before the pandemic, and survival-themed fiction was his favorite.

The Covid lockdown had cut him off from the literacy support he had been receiving as a special education student. During remote learning sessions, his autism and learning disabilities left him unable to navigate email or video-communication applications. By the following year, when he entered the seventh grade, Christopher was reading near a third grade level.

"He could read the words", his mother said, "but he couldn't comprehend them."

Sladek asked the Hillsborough Township school district in central New Jersey about compensatory education – the term for a district's duty to make up services when it fails to provide them to students with disabilities. By Sladek's calculation, her son had lost about 8,000 minutes of instruction. The district initially offered a fraction of that amount – 300 minutes – and according to her complaint, an official said they weren't going to "dwell on the past". An attorney for the district emailed to say officials don't "believe that Christopher is entitled to any compensatory education".



▲ Signs at an elementary school in Atlanta, Georgia, indicate that students will go remote to prevent the spread of Covid on 3 January 2022. Photograph: Alyssa Pointer/Reuters

Parents around the country are facing similar pushback as they try to recoup services lost to the pandemic. It is the latest battle in one of the most litigated arenas in education. In a 2020 survey, just 20% of parents of students with disabilities said their children were receiving required services, and a 2021 report said the pandemic was exacerbating learning gaps for those students.

The frustration among parents is just one of the myriad ways school closures have cast a long shadow over the nation's education system more than two years after the pandemic began. Recent national test scores show historic declines in reading and math achievement, and experts say it could be another three to five years before performance rebounds to pre-Covid levels.

While Congress allocated $122bn in recovery funds for schools over a year ago, districts are struggling to spend that money, plagued by staff shortages, especially in hard-to-fill positions, like special education.

To accommodate students with disabilities, some districts offered teletherapy, but most were unable to provide the same support students received in school. District officials say they can't be blamed for a public health disaster that was out of their control. They insist teachers did the best they could under extraordinary circumstances.

"There is no humanly way possible to make up for 12 months, 13 months, 14 months of services if a school was shut down. It would take years," said Phyllis Wolfram, executive director of the Council of Administrators of Special Education. "We have to think reasonably and logically."

Federal officials see things differently and launched civil rights investigations in three districts and one state. Last month, the US Department of Education reached an agreement with the Fairfax county public schools in Virginia, requiring them to identify which students they failed to serve and begin to make up for it.

"I started shaking as I read the report, overwhelmed by happiness, sadness and anger," said Callie Oettinger, a parent advocate who runs a website focusing primarily on special education in Fairfax county. "We could have avoided the destruction done to kids and to the relationships between educators and parents."

But Wolfram said such requirements place undue burdens on school districts that are already spread thin. The debate is starting to play out in court. In Arkansas, a federal judge ruled in March that the Beebe school district doesn't have to pay for a year of private school tuition for a student with dyslexia because teachers sent home packets of assignments and offered remote instruction.



▲ Marissa Sladek and her son Christopher. Photograph: Courtesy of Marissa Sladek

A case from Washington DC went in the opposite direction. A judge ruled in March that the district owes a child compensatory services because federal law "contains no exception that would allow suspending special education services because a global pandemic forced schools online".

'You don't get that time back'

Across the country, many parents didn't hear from their children's therapists or teachers for months after schools shut down.

"I have seen so much neglect and carelessness and the absolute marginalization of these kids during and after the pandemic," said Georgianna Junco-Kelman, a special education attorney who represents families in Los Angeles. "These kids are not going to regain those skills. You don't get that time back."

The LA district's failure to main-

Continued on page 7

Continued *from page 6*

tain services for students caught the attention of then education secretary Betsy DeVos in the final days of the Trump administration, sparking an investigation by the department's office for civil rights.

The probe found that staff members counted simple emails and phone calls to families as actual services to students, and didn't consider students' individual needs.

Under an agreement superintendent Alberto Carvalho signed in April – similar to the one in Fairfax county – the district must determine how many of its 66,000 students with disabilities are now eligible for services.

Similar probes targeted the Seattle public schools and the Indiana department of education after federal officials received multiple complaints from parents in the state.

Some districts did scramble to find solutions. Just weeks after schools shut down in New Jersey's Tinton Falls school district, about an hour southeast of Hillsborough, special education director Kerri Walsifer began reviewing the individualized education programs (IEPs) that guide the instruction of special education students to see what the district could realistically provide.

And when educators couldn't come through, she tried to make it right.

Prior to the pandemic, Tinton Falls paid for Lina Esposito's daughter Ella, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism, to attend school in the nearby Long Branch district, which was better equipped to meet her needs. But when students returned from remote learning last fall, teachers complained about Ella's behavior. They said she refused to go outside for a fire drill and was a "safety risk", and that Long Branch was no longer a good fit for her.

But Walsifer didn't have a spot for her in Tinton Falls either. That left Ella at home with no services until this past February, when the district found her a new school.

The special education director arranged for Ella to receive speech therapy and behavioral support to make up for some of the services she missed.

'They tear you up'

But other families found districts unwilling to negotiate. For Los Angeles parents Lori and Stephen Saux, the request for compensatory education turned into a drawn-out struggle that ended with them pulling their son Liam out of the district.

"They tear you up, and they make you feel helpless," Lori said.

During remote learning sessions, Liam, who has Down syndrome, didn't receive most of the services spelled out in his IEP, such as a modified physical education program and a resource teacher to help him practice challenging words before answering questions aloud in class.

To fill that void, his mother or father sat with him during video-conference sessions. The teachers would "joke and say, 'You should get your teaching credential because you're so good,'" Lori said. She didn't find it funny.

Last fall, when Covid cases among students spiked, Liam's doctor put him at a higher risk of infection and strongly advised against him returning to school in person until he was fully vaccinated. But school was the only place Liam could get the education he needed.

The conundrum didn't end there. The district's home hospital program turned Liam down because he wasn't sick, and his IEP said placing him in the remote, independent study program would be inappropriate.

Home for four months with no education, he eventually enrolled in a charter school.

A spokesperson for the district said "student matters are confidential" and wouldn't discuss the case.

Now at the Citizens of the World charter school, Liam remains uncomfortable in social situations after nearly two years without classmates and behavioral support, Lori said. It took him a while to sit with others at lunch and join in games. And he still struggles to construct a paragraph and "get out what he's trying to say".

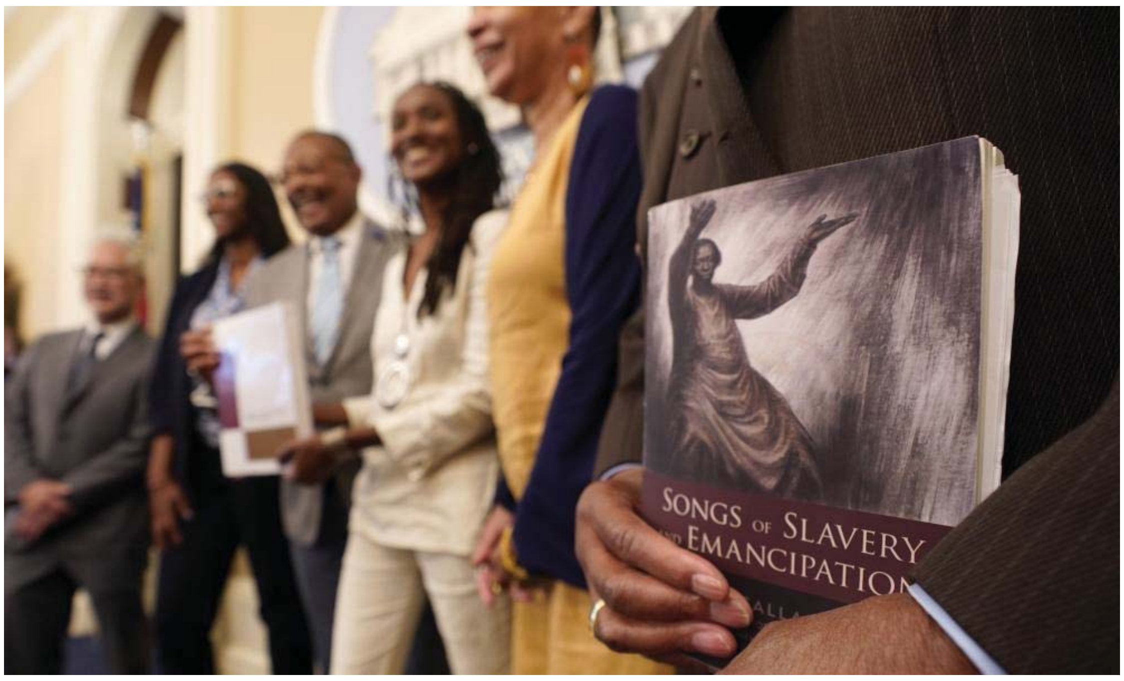
His parents started a podcast to help others advocate for their children and go into negotiations with districts knowing what to expect.

"I don't think their goal is to correct things," she said. "I think their goal is to create a system that looks like they're doing what they're supposed to do."

This report was first published by the 74, a non-profit, non-partisan news site covering education in America

Reparations panel deliberates on compensation for Black Californians

Associated Press and Report for America



▲ *Amos Brown, the vice-chair for the California taskforce, right holds a copy of the book Songs of Slavery and Emancipation, at an event in Sacramento in June. Photograph: Rich Pedroncelli/AP*

After more than a year delving into history and studies to make its case for reparations to California descendants of enslaved Black people, a first-in-the-nation taskforce began deliberations on Wednesday to quantify how financial compensation might be calculated and what might be required to prove eligibility.

Conversations for how to determine payments are in the early stages, with taskforce members acknowledging they have more questions than answers. Economists hired by the taskforce are seeking guidance in five harms experienced by Black people: government taking of property, devaluation of Black-owned businesses, housing discrimination and homelessness, mass incarceration and over-policing, and health.

California's taskforce met at city hall in Oakland, a city that was the birthplace of the Black Panthers but has lost some of its African American population as rising home prices forced people out.

The taskforce must determine when each harm began and ended and who should be eligible for monetary compensation in those areas. For example, the group could choose to limit cash compensation to people incarcerated between 1970 – when more people started being imprisoned for drug-related crimes – to the present. Or they could choose to compensate everyone who lived in over-policed Black neighborhoods, even if they were not themselves arrested.

The taskforce has a 1 July deadline to complete its final report for the Legislature listing recommendations for how the state can atone for and address its legacy of discriminatory policies against Black Californians. Lawmakers will need to pass legislation for payments and other policy changes to take place.

Earlier this year, the committee made the controversial decision to limit reparations to descendants of Black people in the United States as of the 19th century, either as freed or enslaved people.

Taskforce member Monica Montgomery Steppe said they need to take more time addressing time frames, payment calculations and residency.

"This is the foundation of all the other recommendations," she said.

California's governor, Gavin Newsom, signed legislation in 2020 creating the taskforce, giving hope to reparations advocates who had despaired that anything might happen at the federal level. Since then, reparations efforts have bubbled up in cities, counties and at colleges.

On Wednesday, the Boston city council voted to form a taskforce to study reparations and other forms of atonement to Black residents for the city's role in slavery and its legacy of inequality. Lawmakers in other parts of the country have pushed their states and cities to study reparations without much progress. But Evanston, Illinois, became the first US city last year to make reparations available for Black residents, and public officials in New York will try anew to create a reparations commission in the state.

About 60 people attended California's meeting, nodding in agreement as taskforce members spoke of the generational trauma suffered by Black children amid inaccurate and depictions of white families as ideal and Black families as not.

Max Fennell, a 35-year-old coffee company owner, said every person should get $350,000 in compensation to close the racial wealth gap and Black-owned businesses should receive $250,000, which would help them to flourish.

"It's a debt that's owed, we worked for free," he said. "We're not asking; we're telling you."

Demnlus Johnson III, a Richmond city council member, said it's remarkable that the issue is even being talked about publicly.

"You have to name a problem in order to address it," he said. "Of course we want to see it addressed now, the urgency is now, but just having it all aired out and put on the line is a major feat."

Members of the committee will make preliminary policy recommendations, such as audits of government agencies that deal with child welfare and incarceration with the aim of reducing disparities in how Black people are treated.

The group discussed how the state may address its impact on Black families whose property was seized through eminent domain. The topic garnered renewed attention after lawmakers last year voted to return a beachfront property known as Bruce's Beach to descendants of the Black residents who owned it until it was taken in the 20th century.

Officials from Oakland, Sacramento, Los Angeles and other California cities spoke about local reparations efforts.

That included Khansa T Jones-Muhammad, the vice-chair of Los Angeles' Reparations Advisory Commission, created last year under then mayor Eric Garcetti. The goal of the commission is to advise the city on a pilot program for distributing reparations to a group of Black residents, but it doesn't have a timeline set in stone for finishing its work.

In September, economists started listing preliminary estimates for what could be owed by the state as a result of discriminatory policies. But they said they need more data to come up with more complete figures.

Kamilah Moore, the taskforce's chairperson, said the group has not decided on any dollar amounts or what form reparations could take, nor where the money would come from.

California's secretary of state, Shirley Weber, authored the bill that created the state's taskforce, and the group began its work last year. The bill was signed into law in September 2020 after a summer of nationwide protests against racism and police brutality following the murder of George Floyd.

The only thing that should influence the news is the news

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Purdue Northwest chancellor sorry for mocking Asian language in speech

Maya Yang

The chancellor of Purdue University Northwest has apologized amid intense backlash, after he mocked Asian languages during a commencement speech last week.

Thomas L Keon spoke at the school's winter commencement ceremony in Hammond, Indiana, last Saturday. Before Keon spoke, graduates were addressed by James Dedelow, a radio host, who said he sometimes used a "made-up" language on air and with his family.

Keon then approached the lectern, saying "Well, all I can say is", before issuing a string of made-up phrases.

"That's sort of my Asian version of his," Keon said, referring to Dedelow, to laughter from several attendees.

Footage circulated online, prompting widespread outcry.

"What in the hell is this Purdue Northwest?" tweeted Phil Yu, a Korean American blogger. "Imagine attending your loved one's graduation ceremony and having to hear this shit."

Stephanie Chang, a member of the Michigan state senate, wrote: "I got used to hearing this kind of ignorance growing up and yes, into adulthood … but not from a high-ranking educational leader.

"It's 2022. Come on."

Sherrilyn Ifill, a former director-counsel of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund, tweeted: "The professor laughing and nodding next to the chancellor and the one laughing behind him – have they issued statements of remorse?

"What is going on at Purdue Northwest? … This is a question for the board of trustees."

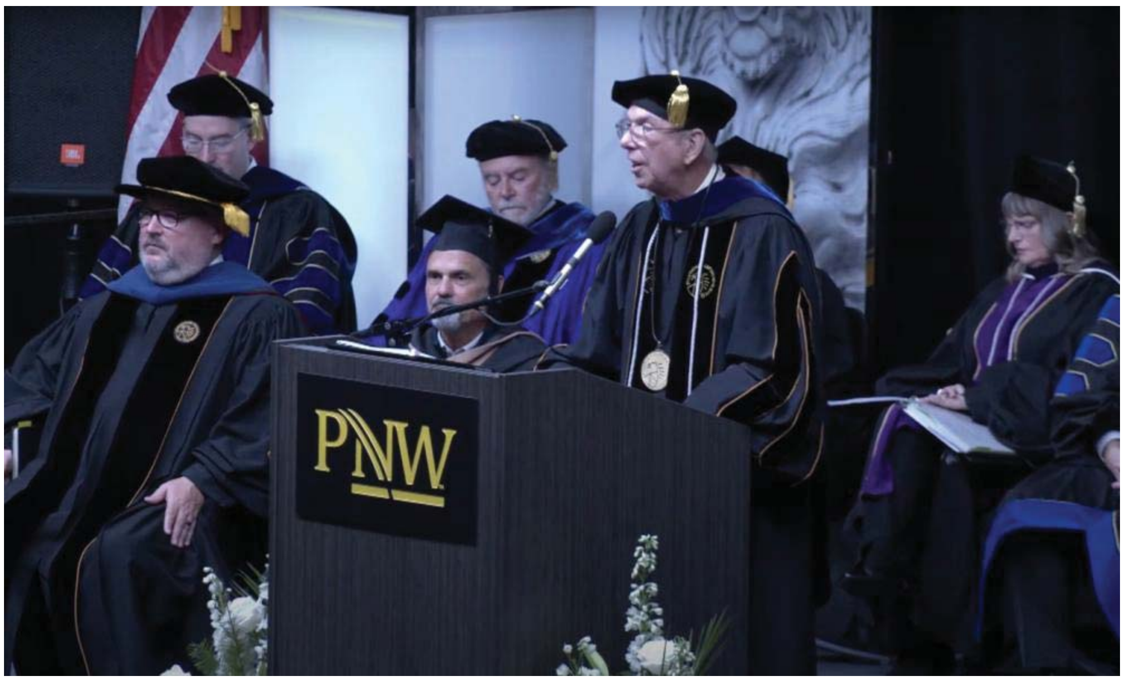
Keon apologized for his remarks. In a statement on Wednesday, he said: "I made a comment that was offensive and insensitive. I am truly sorry for my unplanned, off-the-cuff response to another speaker, as my words have caused confusion, pain and anger.

"We are all human. I made a mistake, and I assure you I did not intend to be hurtful and my comments do not reflect my personal or our institutional values … I will learn from this and assure you that Purdue Northwest and I will take action to prevent such missteps from occurring in the future."

Not everyone was convinced.

Ifill wrote: "The 'apology' – 'I meant no offense. We're all human. I made a mistake' is utterly insufficient. Is the Purdue board satisfied with this as an end to the matter when the chancellor of Purdue Northwest disgraces the school like this?"

Grace Meng, vice-chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, said: "This manufactured and fake apology for what he characterized as a 'mistake' is a farce. Further action should be taken – was this the first time he or Purdue has treated their students and the AAPI [Asian American Pacific Islander] community this way?"



▲ *Chancellor Thomas L Keon speaking at Purdue Northwest commencement ceremony in 2022. Photograph: Youtube*

Three people killed in Louisiana as vast US storm system brings tornadoes

Associated Press in New Orleans

A vast and volatile storm system ripping across the US killed at least three people in Louisiana, spinning up tornadoes that battered the state from north to south, including the New Orleans area. Elsewhere, the huge system hurled blizzard-like conditions at the Great Plains.

Several injuries were reported around Louisiana and there were more than 40,000 power outages statewide as of Wednesday night.

The storms barreled eastward after killing a mother and son in the northwest of the state a day earlier. One suspected tornado killed a woman on Wednesday in south-east Louisiana's St Charles parish and another pummeled parts of New Orleans and Jefferson and St Bernard parishes, including areas badly damaged by a tornado last March.

A tornado struck New Iberia, Louisiana, slightly injuring five people and smashing windows at Iberia Medical Center, the hospital said.

Tornado threats eased in Mississippi, although some counties in Florida and Alabama remained under a severe weather threat.

The New Orleans emergency director, Collin Arnold, said business and residences suffered significant wind damage, largely on the west bank of the Mississippi. One home collapsed. Four people were injured, he said, adding: "The last word we had is that they were stable."

Similar damage was reported nearby. "Several homes and businesses have suffered catastrophic damage," the Jefferson parish sheriff said, from that large suburb west of New Orleans. Among the heavily damaged buildings was the sheriff's training academy building.

In St Bernard parish – where the March tornado caused devastation – the sheriff, Jimmy Pohlman, said the latest damage covered a roughly two-mile stretch. The parish president, Guy McInnis, said the damage was less than in March though numerous roofs were blown away or damaged.

Authorities in St Charles parish, west of New Orleans, said a woman was found dead after a suspected tornado struck Killona, along the Mississippi. Eight people were taken to the hospital, they said.

"She was outside the residence, so we don't know exactly what happened," the sheriff, Greg Champagne, said of the woman killed. "There was debris everywhere. She could have been struck. We don't know for sure. But this was a horrific and a very violent tornado."



▲ *Downed lines and utility poles block roads after a tornado in Harvey, Louisiana Wednesday. Photograph: Christiana Botic/EPA*

About 280 miles away, in northern Louisiana, authorities found the bodies of a mother and child missing after a tornado swept away their mobile home on Tuesday in Keithville, south of Shreveport.

"You go to search a house and the house isn't even there, so where do you search?" the governor, John Bel Edwards, told reporters, as he toured a mile-long path of destruction. He issued an emergency declaration.

The Caddo parish coroner said the body of eight-year-old Nikolus Little was found in woods and the body of his mother, Yoshiko Smith, 30, under storm debris. Casey Jones, with the sheriff's office, said the boy's father had gone for groceries before the storm.

"He just went to go shopping for his family, came home and the house was gone," said Jones.

The storms battered Louisiana north to south. In Union parish, near the Arkansas line, the Farmerville mayor, John Crow, said a tornado on Tuesday night badly damaged an apartment complex where 50 families lived, also wiping out a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes.

"It happened quick," Crow said, saying about 30 homes were also damaged along nearby Lake D'Arbonne.

In Rankin county, Mississippi, a suspected tornado destroyed four large chicken houses, one containing 5,000 roosters, the sheriff said. Mobile homes in Sharkey county were reduced to debris.

The storm began its cross-country journey by dumping heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada. On Tuesday, thunderstorms swept through Texas. At least five people were injured in Grapevine, a Dallas suburb.

Forecasters expect the vast system to hobble the upper midwest with ice, rain and snow for days, and to move into the central Appalachians and north-east. The National Weather Service issued a winter storm watch from Wednesday night through Friday afternoon. Residents from West Virginia to Vermont were told to watch for a possible significant mix of snow, ice and sleet.



▲ *Dark clouds hang over Bradley Lane after a tornado destroyed several mobile homes in New Iberia, Louisiana Wednesday. Photograph: Leslie Westbrook/AP*

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Texas attorney general sought data on gender changes to state IDs

Associated Press

The office of Republican Texas attorney general Ken Paxton this summer sought data on how many people had changed the gender information on their driver's licenses, according to a newspaper report published on Wednesday that civil rights attorneys described as worrying.

The Washington Post reported that public records obtained by the newspaper do not indicate why Paxton's office made the request to the Texas department of public safety (DPS). The head of the driver's license division told colleagues in June to compile the "total number of changes from male to female and female to male for the last 24 months".

A DPS spokesperson told the Post that no data was ultimately handed over because it could not be accurately produced.

Paxton's office did not return a message seeking comment on Wednesday from the Associated Press.

Texas Republicans for years have been at the forefront of efforts to restrict transgender rights. The request came months after Republican Texas governor Greg Abbott ordered child welfare officials to investigate gender-affirming care as child abuse, a move that Paxton's office backed in a legal opinion.



▲ Demonstrators at the Texas capitol protesting transgender-related legislation on 20 May 2021. Photograph: Eric Gay/AP

The DPS found over 16,000 gender changes over the past two years, but officials said a manual search would have been required to determine the reason for each one.

According to records obtained by the Post, DPS staff members repeatedly referred to the request as coming from the attorney general's office as they discussed attempting to narrow the data to include only licenses that had been altered to reflect a court-ordered change in someone's gender.

"A verbal request was received," DPS spokesman Travis Considine told the Post. "Ultimately, our team advised the [attorney general's] office the data requested neither exists nor could be accurately produced. Thus, no data of any kind was provided."

Brian Klosterboer, an attorney at the ACLU of Texas, said this request of information was "highly unusual" and a violation of privacy.

"We suspect that this kind of data inquiry is an attempt to create information to further restrict and curtail the rights of transgender people living in Texas," Klosterboer told the Associated Press.

Abbott has followed other Republican governors in signing legislation that bans transgender youth from participating on public school sports teams that do not align with their sex assigned at birth.

Texas Republicans have also filed legislation to prohibit a change of sex on birth certificates for minors, following in the steps of states that include neighboring Oklahoma, where Republican governor Kevin Stitt this year signed a law prohibiting the use of non-binary gender markers on state birth certificates.

US House votes to remove bust of judge who wrote Dred Scott decision defending slavery

Martin Pengelly in New York

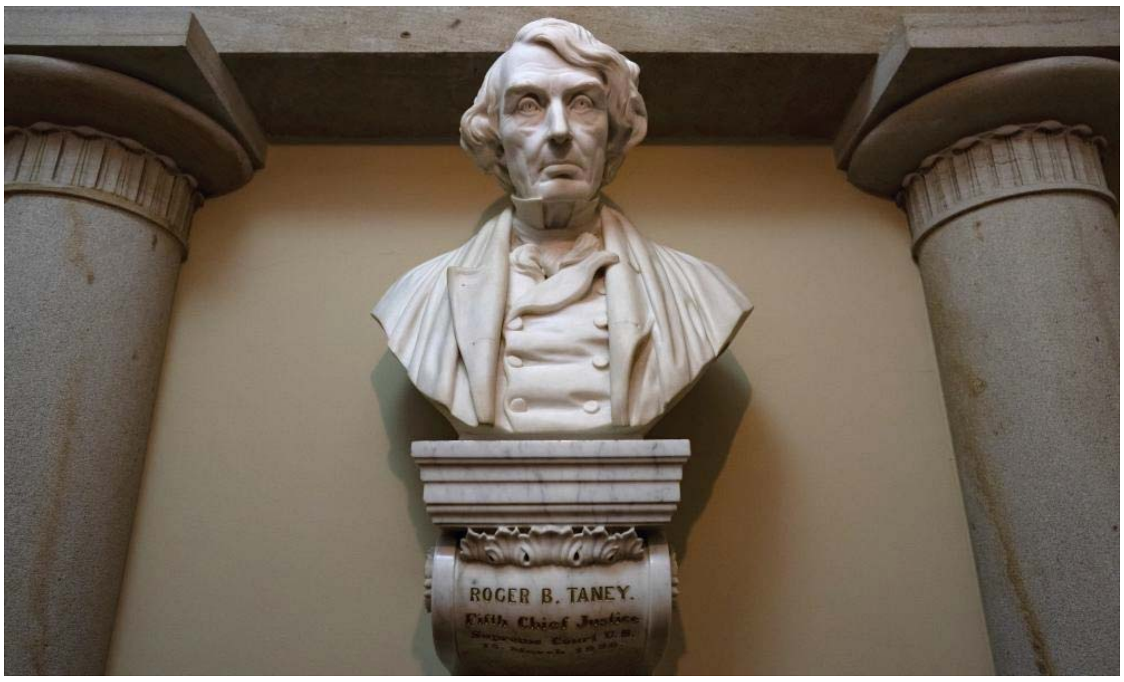
The US House of Representatives voted on Wednesday to remove from the Capitol a bust of Roger Taney, the supreme court justice who in 1857 wrote the Dred Scott decision, justifying slavery and denying that Black people had rights any "white man was bound to respect".

If the new measure is signed into law by Joe Biden, the bust will be removed from outside the old supreme court chamber and replaced by a bust of Thurgood Marshall, the first Black justice.

The measure that passed the House by voice vote was reduced from one which would also have removed statues of Confederates who fought the civil war to protect slavery and which was re-introduced in the aftermath of the Capitol riot of 6 January 2021, when Trump supporters carried Confederate flags into the Capitol.

On Wednesday, Zoe Lofgren, a House Democrat from California, said she would have preferred to remove Confederate statuary too, but to remove the Taney bust was literally about "who we put on a pedestal".

"The United States Capitol is a beacon of democracy, freedom and equality," said Lofgren, a member of the January 6 committee. "What and who we choose to honor in this building should represent our values. Chief Justice Taney … does not meet the standard."



▲ A marble bust of Chief Justice Roger Taney is displayed at the old supreme court chamber in the US Capitol. Photograph: J Scott Applewhite/AP

The Dred Scott case concerned an enslaved man who lived in Illinois and the Louisiana territory, where slavery was forbidden, then with his wife sued for freedom when taken back to Missouri, a state where slavery was legal.

The court ruled 7-2 for Scott's enslaver, John Sandford, an army surgeon.

Taney wrote that Black people "had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit".

The text of the bill to remove the bust of Taney called the ruling "infamous", adding that its the effects "would only be overturned years later by the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the constitution of the United States", thereby "render[ing] a bust of his likeness unsuitable for the honour of display to the many visitors to the Capitol".

It also quoted the withering judgment of Frederick Douglass, the great writer and campaigner who escaped slavery in Taney's native Maryland in 1838.

In May 1857, Douglass lamented "this infamous decision of the slaveholding wing of the supreme court", which "maintains that slaves are within the contemplation of the constitution of the United States, property … in the same sense that horses, sheep, and swine are property".

On Wednesday Chris Van Hollen, a senator from Maryland, said: "We should honour those who advanced justice, not glorify those who stood in its way.

"Sending this legislation to the president's desk is a major step in our efforts to tell the stories of those Americans who have fought for a more perfect union – and remove those who have no place in the halls of Congress."

● This article was amended on 15 December 2022. Zoe Lofgren is a House Democrat from California, not Oregon as an earlier version said.

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Americans bought at least 150m guns in decade since Sandy Hook shooting

Lois Beckett

Americans bought an estimated 150m guns in the past decade, as a drumbeat of mass shootings and other violence has convinced more people that owning a gun for self-defense will make them safer.

In a country where the leading cause of gun death is gun suicide, public health experts say a growth in gun ownership is likely to lead to more deaths.

In the 10 years since the mass shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, the US gun safety movement has gained some political power, while the National Rifle Association has been weakened by internal disputes and legal battles. At the same time, overall gun ownership in the US appears to have grown.

People who choose to own guns are still a minority of the US population, with about a third of Americans saying they personally own a gun, and fewer than half saying they live in a house with a gun, according to survey estimates.

But the total number of American gun owners appears to have risen in recent years. One large survey conducted by Harvard and Northeastern University researchers estimates that the number of American gun owners rose by 20 million since 2015, from an estimated 55 million to 75 million people.

The number of Americans who choose to carry guns in public also appears to be rising, with 16 million people saying in 2019 that they carried a handgun at least once a month, and 6 million saying they did so daily, according to a new research study. That's roughly double the number who said they regularly carried handguns in public in 2015.



▲ *People wait in line outside to enter a gun store in Culver City, California, in March 2020. Photograph: Patrick T Fallon/Reuters*

Surveys over the past few decades show that an increasing proportion of Americans say they own a gun for self-defense, not hunting or recreation, said Deborah Azrael, a Harvard firearms researcher. In 2021, Gallup found, 88% percent of gun owners cited "crime protection" as their reason for owning a firearm.

Americans' perception of the risk of crime and violence has often not lined up with reality: Gallup also found that, for nearly three decades, large majorities of Americans said almost every year that crime had risen nationally since the year before, even in the years when it was falling sharply. In 2013, Pew found that the majority of the public was simply unaware that the country's gun homicide rate had fallen nearly 50% since 1993.

In the past three years, the coronavirus pandemic, nationwide protests against police violence and the insurrection at the US capitol supercharged US gun sales, with an estimated 5 million Americans becoming gun owners in 2020 and 2021, researchers found.

The top reasons for buying a gun early in the pandemic, according to a survey of California residents, were concerns about lawlessness, concerns about people being released from prison, the "government going too far", and "government collapse".

"When social problems happen, guns are one of the tools at the disposal of Americans", and for many Americans, they are "a familiar tool", Jennifer Carlson, a sociologist who studies US firearms culture, told the Guardian in an early 2020 interview, as gun sales surged. "If there's a run on toilet paper, what's going to be next? It's just the prudent thing to get a gun."

The majority of US gun owners are still white men, and the largest proportion live in the South, according to survey data. But research studies and gun industry sources agree that the demographics of gun ownership is shifting, with women estimated to make up half of new gun purchasers since 2019, and people of color making up nearly half, according to one major survey. Between 2019 and 2021, an estimated 5% of Black adults in the United States bought a gun for the first time.

Because of the political influence of gun rights advocates, there is no official government data on how many Americans own guns, or even exactly how many guns there are in civilian hands. Estimates range from 345m to 393m to more than 420m, according to the firearm industry trade group's most recent data.

While there's lots of interest in the eye-popping total number of guns in the US, "what matters is how these guns are distributed across people and households", said Matthew Miller, a Northeastern University professor who specializes in firearm research, and what that distribution means for their increased risk of gun suicide, homicide or accidental injury.

His 2021 study found that a surge of gun buying before and during the pandemic meant that an additional 5 million US children now live in households with guns.

The best proxy for US gun sales over time is examining the number of federal criminal background checks conducted on gun sales by licensed firearms dealers. (In many states, individuals can sell guns to each other without any background check.)

Two widely cited estimates, both based on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' background check statistics, put the number of gun sales in the US since January 2013 at around 150m, though that figure is likely an undercount.

Because Americans can buy multiple firearms at one time with a single background check, and because some states also allow people with a concealed weapons license to buy guns without background checks, the actual number of gun sales in the past decade is almost certainly higher than 150m, said Mark Oliva of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a gun industry trade group that estimates there were at least 152m guns sales since January 2013.



▲ *Lisa Caso sells guns at Caso's Gun-A-Rama store in Jersey City, New Jersey. Women are estimated to make up half of new gun purchasers since 2019. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images*

At the same time, the number of background checks over the past decade will also include some double-counting of the same guns re-sold between people, said Jurgen Brauer, the co-founder of Small Arms Analytics, a firearms data company. Brauer estimates that, by the end of December, the total number of US gun sales in the past decade will reach nearly 164m.

Gun deaths have been rising in recent years, with a stark 35% increase in the nation's firearm homicide rate in 2020, but a study that examined the pandemic surge in gun sales and increase in gun murders at the state level found no evidence of a clear association.

There were nearly 21,000 firearm homicides and more than 26,000 firearm suicides across the US in 2021, according to preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Senate votes to ban TikTok on US government-owned devices

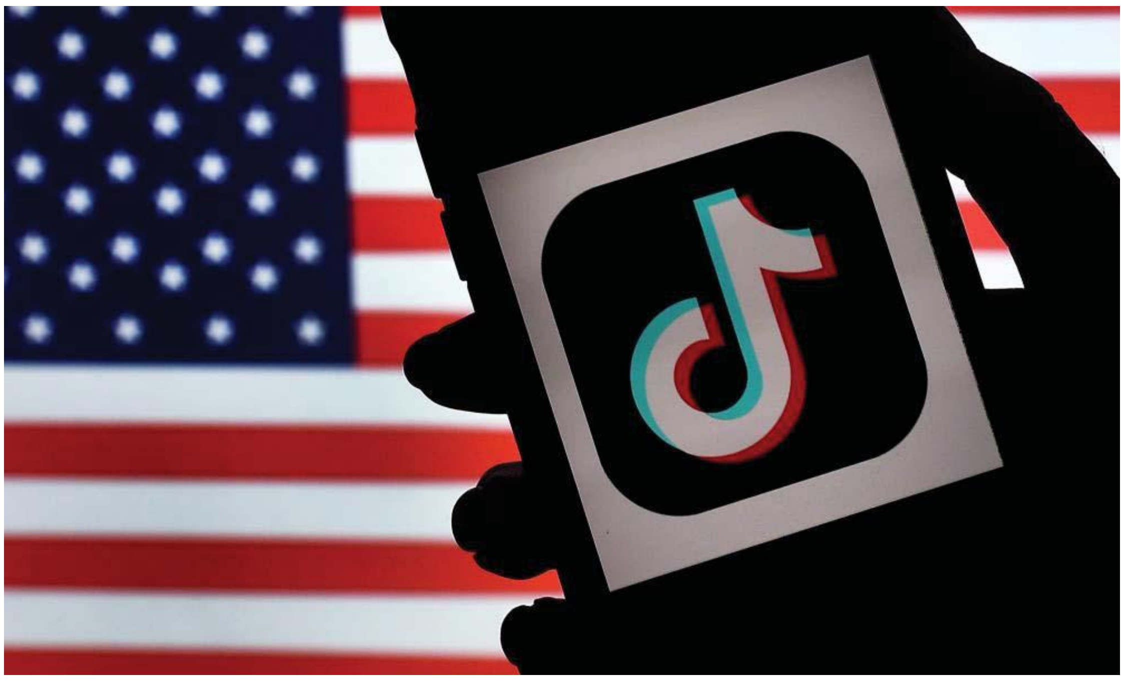
Reuters

The US Senate late on Wednesday passed by voice-vote a bill to bar federal employees from using Chinese-owned TikTok on government-owned devices.

The bill must still be approved by the US House of Representatives before going to Joe Biden for approval. The House of Representatives would need to pass the Senate bill before the current congressional session ends, which is expected next week.

The vote is the latest action on the part of US lawmakers to crackdown on Chinese companies amid national security fears that Beijing could use them to spy on Americans.

The Senate action comes after North Dakota and Iowa this week joined a growing number of states in banning TikTok, owned by ByteDance, from state-owned devices amid concerns that data could be passed on to the Chinese government.



▲ *The bill must still be approved by the House and signed by President Biden to take effect. Photograph: Olivier Douliery/AFP/Getty Images*

During the last Congress, the Senate in August 2020 unanimously approved legislation to bar TikTok from government devices. The bill's sponsor, Republican Senator Josh Hawley, reintroduced in legislation in 2021.

Many federal agencies including the defense, Homeland Security and state departments already ban TikTok from government-owned devices. "TikTok is a major security risk to the United States, and it has no place on government devices," Hawley said previously.

North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum and Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds issued directives prohibiting executive branch agencies from downloading the app on any government-issued equipment. Around a dozen US states have taken similar actions, including Alabama and Utah this week.

TikTok has said the concerns are largely fueled by misinformation and are happy to meet with policymakers to discuss the company's practices.

"We're disappointed that so many states are jumping on the political

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bandwagon to enact policies based on unfounded falsehoods about TikTok that will do nothing to advance the national security of the United States," the company said Wednesday.

Other states taking similar actions include Texas, Maryland and South Dakota.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio on Tuesday unveiled bipartisan legislation to ban TikTok altogether in the United States, ratcheting up pressure on ByteDance due to US fears the app could be used to spy on Americans and censure content. Rubio also is a sponsor of Hawley's TikTok government-device ban bill.

The legislation would block all transactions from any social media company in or under the influence of China and Russia, Rubio's office said.

At a hearing last month, FBI Director Chris Wray said TikTok's US operations raise national security concerns.

In 2020, then President Donald Trump attempted to block new users from downloading TikTok and ban other transactions that would have effectively blocked the apps' use in the United States but lost a series of court battles over the measure.

The government's committee on foreign investment in the United States, a powerful national security body, in 2020 ordered ByteDance to divest TikTok because of the fears that US user data could be passed to the Chinese government, though ByteDance has not done so.

CFIUS and TikTok have been in talks for months to reach a national security agreement to protect the data of TikTok's more than 100 million users but it does not appear any deal will be reached before the end of the year.

Channel boat disaster: teenager among four people confirmed dead

Rajeev Syal and Dan Sabbagh in Dover



The rescue operation involved the coastguard, the French and British navies, RNLI lifeboats and fishers. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

A teenager was among four people who died after a small boat capsized in the Channel, it has emerged, as search operations ended on Thursday evening.

Eight unaccompanied children were among 39 people rescued at about 3am on Wednesday, most of them pulled out of the icy waters.

More than 400 people crossed the Channel in small boats on the same day, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said.

The Kent county council leader, Roger Gough, told a meeting the teenager was among the dead, adding that the tragedy was a "sobering reminder of the human costs of what is an ongoing crisis".

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) is reviewing evidence of the incident to decide whether an inquiry should be launched.

A government spokesperson said: "The extensive search coordinated by HM Coastguard for people missing from a small boat in the English Channel was concluded at 1700 today. A total of 43 people were recovered from the water, sadly including four fatalities.

"Our thoughts continue to be with those affected by this tragic incident and with the families of those who have lost their lives. We would like to thank everyone involved in the search and rescue operation."

The RNLI lifeboat charity has praised a fishing boat crew who were first on the scene and "undoubtedly saved countless lives".

Ben Squire, the owner of Plymouth-based Oceanic Drifter Fishing, said a team onboard one of his scallop boats helped to pull 31 people from the water.

"The skipper called me to tell me he was involved in a serious incident," he told ITV News West Country.

"They were fishing mid-Channel, halfway between England and France, and a rigid inflatable boat with people onboard, migrants, was crossing and was sinking very, very near to where he was fishing."

The MoD said 401 people had been detected in eight boats on Wednesday, not including those who had died. The latest figures take the provisional total number to have made the crossing so far this year to 45,223, an analysis of government data shows.

Suella Braverman, the UK home secretary, and her French counterpart, Gérald Darmanin, released a joint statement, sending "our deepest condolences to the loved ones of those involved" and emphasised the two countries' cooperation in the rescue efforts.

The pair said the incident was "a stark reminder of the urgent need to destroy the business model of people-smugglers" who charge large sums to facilitate the crossing.

Rescuers from the fishing boats said they had been told that people had paid £5,000 for a place on the dinghy, with people coming from Afghanistan, Iraq, Senegal and India.

In November last year, at least 27 people drowned when an overcrowded dinghy sank. Accusations followed that French and British authorities had passed the buck and failed to coordinate a proper rescue – and Wednesday's efforts suggested a greater coordination between the two countries.

A distress call was first received at 1.53am UK time on Wednesday by a charity in northern France, with a man calling for the alarm to be raised to save his family who were in the icy waters. "Please help me, bro, please, please, please. We are in the water and we have a family," he said.

The alarm was raised with the UK and French authorities at 1.59am. The major rescue operation began at 2.16am and involved the Royal Navy, French navy, coastguard, RNLI lifeboats, ambulance service and police.

None of the survivors were in hospital and their claims will be processed by the UK immigration authorities in the normal way once any further police and medical checks are complete.

Braverman's plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, which the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, has backed, could face further setbacks on Monday when the high court is due to rule on the policy.

Two judicial reviews were brought against the scheme, under which people seeking refuge are sent to the central African country before their claims are processed.

Priti Patel, then home secretary, announced the deal in April. It has so far cost £140m, already spent by the Rwandan government. No flights have yet taken off.

More than 40,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats this year to try to reach the UK, typically paying several hundred or a few thousand pounds for the dangerous crossing, which can take five hours or more.

Many came from conflict-ridden countries such as Syria, Afghanistan or Sudan and the grant rate of asylum applications is more than 90% in initial cases. Their numbers have risen as a result of growing numbers coming from Albania, and earlier this week Sunak said he would seek to speed up the return of people to the Balkan state, because the country was not involved in a war.

Meta warns spyware still being used to target people on social media

Stephanie Kirchgaessner



Nathaniel Gleicher, head of security policy at Meta, said spyware companies were 'very ready to keep trying to come back'. Photograph: Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP/

Meta has warned that the use of spyware to indiscriminately target people – including journalists and activists – is a persistent threat because surveillance-for-hire companies continue to adapt and change tactics in the face of efforts to shut down their capabilities.

A report by Facebook's parent company described efforts by the social media group to remove a number of firms, including two linked to Russia, one based in Israel, and an entity in China, all of which were alleged by Meta to have been used to "scrape" Facebook and Instagram for users' private information in an attempt to compromise users' accounts.

In one case, Meta said it removed more than 100 accounts on Facebook and Instagram linked to a company called Avalanche in Russia, which it said sold access to a platform that allows spying across the internet. Meta said a host of individuals and groups were targeted using the Russian network, from environmental activists, members of the media, NGOs in the US and politicians. Other companies that were removed from Meta platforms include a New York-based company called Social Links, which was originally based in Russia, and Cyberglobes, based in Israel.

At the same time, Meta acknowledged that other companies it sought to ban last year from its platforms after accusations that the groups' software had been used to target thousands of users with malicious activity have tried to circumvent blocks on Meta's platforms and updated their software to try to evade detection.

Nathaniel Gleicher, the head of security policy at Meta, said the company had sought to share information about threats with governments and other technology companies to mitigate the threat against users. But Gleicher also acknowledged that one big player in the social media industry – Twitter – no longer appeared to be available to accept information about such threats.

"Our key goal is to do everything we can to protect people. So we share our insights with our industry peers. Twitter is going through a transition right now and most of the people we've dealt with have moved on. As a result, we have to wait and see what they announce in these threat areas," Gleicher told reporters on a call about the Meta report.

Forbes reported in November that Twitter's security, privacy and compliance leaders all left the company less than two weeks after its acquisition by the billionaire Elon Musk.

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Gleicher emphasised that no single company could tackle a "society-wide" challenge such as spyware. "They [spyware companies] are very ready to keep trying to come back, to re-establish their businesses," Gleicher said.

Twitter was not available for comment.

Meta said some vendors of spyware used to target its users sometimes claim their software is intended to focus on criminals and terrorists, but Meta said its own threat research found that the software was used "regularly" to target "journalists, political opposition and human rights activists around the world".

"These companies are part of a sprawling industry that provides intrusive software tools and surveillance services indiscriminately to any customer – regardless of who they target or the human rights abuses they might enable," Meta said in its report. "In a sense, this industry 'democratises' these threats, making them available to government and non-government groups that otherwise wouldn't have these capabilities to cause harm."

In one case, Meta said it shut down a network of 900 fake Instagram and Facebook accounts operating from China, which appeared to focus on people in Myanmar, India, Taiwan, the US and China, including military personnel, pro-democracy activists, government employees, politicians and journalists.

Avalanche could not be reached for comment. Social Links and Cyberglobes did not immediately return requests for comment.

Unilever settles Israel dispute with Ben & Jerry's board

Reuters

Unilever said on Thursday that its litigation with the independent board of Ben & Jerry's over the sale of its Israeli ice cream business has "been resolved".

The company did not provide details of how the litigation had been resolved.

Unilever in June sold its Ben & Jerry's ice cream business in Israel and the West Bank to its local licensee, Avi Zinger, for an undisclosed sum. The next month, Ben & Jerry's filed a lawsuit against a Unilever subsidiary to try to block the sale.

The Vermont-based ice cream brand said last year it no longer wanted to sell its products in the occupied West Bank because it was inconsistent with its values. Ben & Jerry's products have been for sale in Israel for decades.

In an updated lawsuit filed in September, Ben & Jerry's said it was seeking damages and wanted the trademarks returned. The company also asked a judge to stop Zinger from selling the ice cream in the West Bank.

Ben & Jerry's declined to comment and Ben & Jerry's independent board did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"I am pleased that the litigation between Unilever and the independent board of Ben & Jerry's has been resolved," Avi Zinger said in a statement on Thursday.

"There is no change to the agreement I made with Unilever earlier in the year. I look forward to continuing to produce and sell the great tasting Ben & Jerry's ice cream under the Hebrew and Arabic trademarks throughout Israel and the West Bank long into the future."

Linz to rename Porsche Street after investigating Nazi past of car creator

AFP in Vienna



▲ *A street cafe in the centre of Linz. The city senate is expected to approve the renaming this month. Photograph: Alamy*

The Austrian city of Linz has announced plans to rename a street honouring the founder of the luxury carmaker Porsche after a commission investigating controversial names found his Nazi past "problematic".

The renaming of streets and other public places is still a hotly debated issue in Austria – Adolf Hitler's birthplace – which Nazi Germany annexed in 1938 and which long cast itself as a victim.

Only in the past three decades has the country begun to seriously examine its role in the Holocaust, in which about a third of Austria's Jewish population of 200,000 were murdered.

The Porscheweg and three other streets in Linz, were to be renamed, a city spokesperson said on Thursday.

The city senate was expected to approve the renaming this month, she added. No new names for the streets have been decided yet.

In 2019, Linz, which is 115 miles (185km) west of the Austrian capital, Vienna, asked a commission of six experts to investigate the city's street names.

In its report, published in November, the commission found 64 names "problematic" out of a total of 1,158.

They belonged to 61 men and three women who were at the very least members of the Nazi party, if not active supporters propagating Nazi ideology, the report noted.

Four men in particular were seen as antisemitic, including the Austrian-born engineer Ferdinand Porsche, founder of the luxury car brand that bears his name.

"Porsche played a central role in the NS [National Socialism] war economy and actively promoted the forced labour of prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates," the city said in a statement, announcing the commission's findings.

In doing so, Porsche "accepted their deaths and the deaths of their children due to the inhumane conditions in the camps", it added.

Porsche did not immediately reply to an AFP request for comment, but the company indicated in the Kurier newspaper that it did not support the renaming move.

"In our view, erasing history in public space does not lead to any social progress," it said.

The other three names the commission found particularly "tainted" – and where the street names will be changed – were those of the composer Hans Pfitzner, the entertainer Franz Resl and the bishop Johannes Maria Gföllner.

Numerous streets throughout Austria have been renamed or contextualised through plaques after being found to be racist, often honouring antisemitic or otherwise tainted historical figures.

Streets that refer to Porsche still exist in other parts of Austria.

Inquiry launched into claims SAS soldiers killed Afghan civilians

Dan Sabbagh Defence and security editor

Ministers have announced a statutory judge-led inquiry into allegations of more than 50 summary killings by SAS soldiers in Afghanistan, a decision made after years of reports that elite British troops killed civilians in cold blood.

In a statement to the House of Commons, Andrew Murrison, the minister for defence people, said the Ministry of Defence (MoD) would concede to longstanding demands for an "independent statutory inquiry" after years of dismissing the idea. The inquiry will cover the period from mid-2010 to mid-2013.

The minister said Lord Justice Haddon-Cave would take on the job, and work would start "in earnest in 2023". Haddon-Cave will stand down from his job as the senior presiding judge for England and Wales to focus on the task.

The announcement follows allegations that 54 Afghans were killed in suspicious circumstances by one SAS unit in Helmand province between 2010 and 2011, and accusations that this amounted to war crimes.

John Healey, the shadow defence secretary, said: "This special inquiry is welcome and must succeed. It is essential to protect the reputation of our British special forces, guarantee the integrity of military investigations and secure justice for any of those affected."

A high court case brought by the law firm Leigh Day on behalf of one man, Saifullah, alleged that his father, two brothers and a cousin were killed during an SAS raid on a compound in southern Afghanistan in February 2011. It was called Objective Tyburn by the SAS, referring to a historic place of

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execution in London.

Evidence from disclosures required by the court indicated that Afghan men detained on SAS night raids were often separated from their families and shot dead after they were said to have unexpectedly produced a hand grenade or an AK47 rifle.

Saifullah's legal team sought a judicial review, arguing that the MoD did not properly investigate allegations of unlawful activity and that Britain had breached its human rights obligations by not properly examining them.

Internal correspondence revealed that an SAS sergeant-major described the episode as "the latest massacre!" in an email sent the following morning, after the report on a mission that led to the deaths of Saifullah's family members was filed.

Concerns about SAS activity in Afghanistan have been circling around the MoD for years, but criminal investigations were closed three years ago without any prosecutions being brought.

In 2014, military police launched Operation Northmoor, an investigation into allegations of more than 600 offences by British forces in Afghanistan, including the alleged killing of civilians by the SAS. It was wound down in 2017 and closed in 2019, and the MoD said no evidence of criminality was found.



▲ *An RAF Chinook in Afghanistan in 2010. Photograph: Major Paul Smyth/PA*

Allegations about SAS conduct have also been broadcast by the BBC in a succession of Panorama documentaries. In July, before the broadcast of one such programme, the MoD accused the broadcaster of engaging in "irresponsible, incorrect" journalism by being prepared to air the allegations in the first place.

However, within 24 hours of that statement there were signs of a change of heart. Military police began a fresh investigation into the allegations, in which the BBC and other organisations were asked to share information, and which led to Thursday's announcement.

In court proceedings in July relating to Saifullah's case, Edward Craven, a lawyer representing the claimants, said the case "concerns alleged state wrongdoings of the most serious kind" and that there was "a pattern of extra-judicial killings, allegations of a cover-up and allegations of a failure to properly investigate them".

The court heard that a military police officer wrote that "political pressure" was applied in 2016 to narrow the focus of a military police investigation into allegations of summary killings by SAS soldiers to limit their inquiries to "tactical-level command responsibility".

Lawyers said the inquiry's task would not be to determine individuals' criminal or civil liability, but instead to focus on whether Afghans were killed unlawfully and if there was a credible pattern of unlawful killings by the SAS. It may recommend that further criminal or civil investigations are necessary.

A member of Saifullah's family, who was not named, said in a statement released by their lawyers that their wish was for the truth to come out and for those responsible to be brought to account.

"I did not ever think this would happen. I am extremely happy that there are people who value the loss of life of my family, of Afghans, enough to investigate," the statement said.

The defence secretary, Ben Wallace, said shortly after the announcement that there had been "several comprehensive investigations into the events in question", but it was now appropriate to consider "if there are further lessons to learn" at the same time as protecting SAS personnel from "unnecessary reinvestigations".

Four chimpanzees still loose inside Swedish zoo a day after escape

Associated Press in Stockholm

Four chimpanzees, one of which is wounded, were on the loose inside a building in a Swedish zoo on Thursday, a day after they escaped from their enclosure. Three others have been shot dead.

Swedish officials and media said the wounded animal had not received veterinary attention because no one could safely get inside the building at Furuvik zoo.

The chimps were inside the monkey house but staff had not been able to get the three uninjured ones back into their enclosure, the animal park said in a statement. The wounded animal returned to its enclosure on its own.

"This means that we cannot yet allow people to move freely in the park and we are still on full alert," the zoo said.

The situation was "extremely serious and tragic, both for our animals and our employees", the zoo said, adding it did not know how the primates got out.



▲ *Furuvik zoo staff said they were still on full alert. Photograph: Tt News Agency/Reuters*

The animals escaped on Wednesday, prompting the zoo to alert the authorities. Three chimps were shot dead by staff and the fourth was wounded. The zoo told Swedish media that the animals had to be killed because there was not enough tranquilliser for all of them.

"Our focus right now is to get an overview of where the four are now so that we can start working on getting them back to their enclosures in a safe way," Annika Troselius, a spokesperson for the company operating the zoo, told the Swedish broadcaster SVT.

"We have to think about people's lives and safety in the first place. No employees are allowed to work in close contact with animals like this," she said.

Furuvik zoo is near Gävle, 100 miles (165km) north of Stockholm, and is part of an amusement park. According to the park's webpage, it is also the only primate research station in the Nordic countries.

It is not the first time in recent months that animals have briefly escaped from Swedish zoos. In October, a venomous king cobra escaped from its terrarium at a zoo in Sweden but returned by itself after a week. Daniel Roth of the Swedish Zoo Association told the Swedish news agency TT that he saw no connection between the events.

European parliament may ban Qatari officials from premises

Jennifer Rankin in Brussels and Helena Smith in Athens

The European parliament will consider banning Qatari officials from its premises in response to a "cash for influence" investigation that has become the biggest scandal in the institution's history.

The parliament's president, Roberta Metsola, said the assembly's senior leaders would discuss a possible ban and that a "wide-ranging reform" package would be implemented in response to a Belgian police investigation that has led to four people being charged with money laundering and corruption, including a serving MEP.

Asked whether she would ban representatives of Qatar or other government officials implicated in the scandal from the parliament, Metsola said: "That is one of the questions I will put to the conference of presidents immediately," referring to the parliament's top leadership body.

Qatar has denied any wrongdoing in relation to the investigation in which police have seized nearly €1.5m (£1.3m) in cash from Brussels properties.

MEPs have spoken of how they were offered free trips and World Cup

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tickets to visit the Gulf state, which has been seeking to neutralise criticism of its treatment of migrant workers. Metsola said she had also been invited to the World Cup, but "I refused because I have concerns about that country".

Banning government officials from European parliament premises is a rare step, although representatives of Russian companies, many with ties to the Kremlin, have been barred from the assembly's buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg since June because of the war against Ukraine.

Metsola was speaking at an EU summit in Brussels, where she discussed the scandal with the bloc's 27 leaders. "There will be no immunity, no sweeping things under the carpet, there will be no business as usual," she told journalists as she arrived.

She was thanked at the summit for her frankness in discussing the issue and received "full support" from EU leaders, one EU source said.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, said: "I think we need to know the facts, understand who is implicated and then take the appropriate measures."

At a press conference, Metsola promised to publish reform proposals in the new year, including "a ban on all unofficial friendship groups", which are sometimes sponsored by lobbyists and foreign governments. There was, she said, not enough monitoring or control of these groups, including on who pays for travel.



▲ Roberta Metsola said of the scandal: 'There will be no immunity, no sweeping things under the carpet.' Photograph: Johanna Geron/ Reuters

The parliament does not know how many friendship groups exist and has said they have no official status. Some MEPs have expressed frustration that foreign countries see a friendship group as the voice of the parliament, rather than official committees and delegations, which are subject to rules on membership and much greater scrutiny.

On Wednesday, the Guardian reported that the MEP leading the Bahrain friendship group had failed to declare a trip to the country and had been criticised for a one-sided proposal on a human-rights activist that echoed the talking points of the Gulf state.

The European parliament's friendship group with Qatar was suspended after the scandal broke.

The parliament would take an "in-depth look on how we interact with third countries", Metsola said, adding that MEPs and their assistants would have to record meetings with foreign government representatives on a transparency register, or face sanctions for non-compliance.

Officials would also take a closer look at non-government organisations on the transparency register, after it emerged that some purported campaign groups appeared to be fronts for authoritarian governments.

On Wednesday, the MEP at the centre of the scandal, the Greek Socialist Eva Kaili, learned that a hearing on whether to grant her bail would be delayed until next week. Two other suspects remain in pre-trial detention, including Kaili's partner, Francesco Giorgi, who is a parliamentary assistant to a different MEP. A third person has been released with an electronic tag.

Speaking on the Greek TV station ANT1, Kaili's Athens-based lawyer, Michalis Dimitrakopoulos, said his client would not become the scandal's "Iphighenia", or sacrificial victim. Her only link to the bags full of bank notes that had been found in her Brussels home was that she was there at the time, he said.

"The inquiry that has been ongoing for many months has not shown she had any relationship with the money or any suspicious conversations," he said. "Her partner is the person who brought the money into her house."

The lawyer said that when Kaili learned of the hoard and "did not receive a persuasive answer", she asked her father, Alexandros, a Greek civil servant who was in the Belgian capital, to take the bank notes to the person to whom they belonged. He was arrested with the suitcase before making the handover.

Referring to the influence-peddling revelations, Dimitrakopoulos said: "The money in the house has no connection whatsoever to her [Kaili's] statements about Qatar. All of Mrs Kaili's actions and initiatives were taken with the approval of the European parliament. Mrs Kaili did not have a personal agenda."

Fallout over the scandal intensified on Thursday as judicial authorities in Greece announced a separate investigation into possible money laundering and bribery involving Kaili. The investigation came days after Greek authorities froze all assets belonging to Kaili and her immediate family.

Boy killed in Montpellier amid violence after France-Morocco game

Jon Henley in Paris

A 14-year-old boy has died after being struck by a car amid scattered incidents of violence in several French cities after France's World Cup semi-final victory over Morocco on Wednesday night, local authorities have said.

The local government office in the southern city of Montpellier said police were searching for the driver of the car, which was abandoned nearby after the "violent collision" and was being examined for fingerprints and other evidence.

The unnamed boy was taken to hospital but died shortly afterwards, the Hérault département said. Witnesses said the driver had driven off at high speed, hitting two adolescents, after fans tried to seize the French flag flying from his car window.

The mayor of Montpellier, Michaël Delafosse, said he was "deeply dismayed" by the incident, which reportedly happened less than an hour after France qualified for their second successive World Cup final by beating Morocco 2-0.



▲ While post-match celebrations were generally peaceful, a total of 262 people were arrested nationwide. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/ Getty Images

While post-match celebrations were generally peaceful, a total of 262 people were arrested nationwide, with incidents in cities including Marseille, Avignon, Annecy, Grenoble, Lyon, Nice, Bordeaux and Paris, police and local authorities said.

More than 165 were detained in the greater Paris region, including 145 in the capital itself, where an estimated 25,000 fans gathered on the Champs-Élysées. Five police officers suffered minor injuries, mainly from fireworks, authorities said.

Among those arrested in Paris were a group of about 40 far-right activists, several of whom were already known to police, who were stopped by a police patrol and detained for conspiracy to commit violence and possession of banned weapons.

"They were clearly heading towards the Champs-Élysées looking for trouble," a police source told Libération newspaper. A police union spokesperson, Stanislas Gaudon, told RMC radio that overall the evening had been "relatively quiet" with the exception of "a few outbreaks of violence in Paris that were quickly brought under control".

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Why are so many women living in separate homes from their partners and kids? Because it's a win-win situation

Emma Brockes

The model coupling – the dream, if you will – was always Helena Bonham Carter and Tim Burton, or Annie Leibovitz and Susan Sontag: maintaining a marriage, de facto or real, across two separate households, so that you got all the benefits with none of the gross bits. You could keep the magic alive, extend the honeymoon period indefinitely and, by protecting your space and rationing your time together, create a scenario in which you were actually happy to see each other. Trends originating with celebrities tend to be fake, meaningless or massaged, but the appeal of this model has lingered on. Overlooking the small matter of money, what, exactly, is there not to like?


▲ *Director Tim Burton and actor Helena Bonham Carter were the poster couple for living in separate houses – until they divorced. Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/Reuters*

Or rather, what is there not to like for the women in any given couple? In the New York Times this week – sound the klaxon – a new trends piece drops on the growing numbers of women in the US who, post-pandemic, are opting to sustain the separate household model of marriage, established during lockdown by some families to reduce Covid transmissions, and proving so preferable to the norm, apparently, that they're in no hurry to reunite with their husbands.

It's well known that among straight couples, women initiate most divorces – by some reckonings 70% – and pushing for separate households is, I would imagine, a staging post towards this end for many of the numbers in this new trend. But for others, perhaps it really is a viable solution to the problem of loving your spouse but not wanting them underfoot all the sodding time.

I confess, I'm biased in this area. I live with my kids, but I've never cohabited full time with a romantic partner. The luxury of deciding when people come and go in your house is a hard one to relinquish and once you get used to not living inside someone else's emotional weather – the idea of it makes me simultaneously panicked and livid – it's very hard to give it up.

In the US and the UK marriage numbers have been declining for the last decade, and for some time in both countries, single adult women have outnumbered their married counterparts. What's new is the surge in those who still identify as married but live apart from their spouse; in the US, married couples maintaining separate households rose by a quarter between 2000 and 2019, and in 2021, that number sharply climbed again, according to the New York Times. It is estimated by the Census Bureau that 3.89 million Americans, or 2.95% of married couples, live apart. They even have a little acronym: Lat, or "living apart together".

The trend appears a likely result both of everyone being home for the past two-plus years and driving each other insane, and the fact that after lockdown ended, studies showed that men swiftly dropped the childcare and domestic work some had adopted during that period. Judging by case studies in the article, for some women, quarantining in a quiet, separate residence while their husbands shouldered the caretaking at home, struck them at the level of a revelation. For others, the fact that even a global pandemic did little to undermine – or in some cases, actively deepened – the division of labour at home along traditional gender lines had a straw-that-broke-it effect.

I mean, obviously there are downsides to this whole thing, mainly financial, particularly if you have kids. The overheads on two households are eye-bleeding. I remember being shaken when, straight out of college, a few friends hastily moved in with their partners and just as hastily married, primarily, it seemed to me, to reduce costs. This seemed mad at the time, but on reflection, perhaps, was no madder a rationale than any other. And on closer inspection, of course, neither of those totemic celebrity relationships advertised anything beyond separation (Bonham Carter/Burton) or dysfunction (Leibovitz/Sontag).

The Lat model can also be a dodge, I see that. If I wasn't too cheap and lazy to go to therapy I would address the fact that my own behaviour is often avoidance masquerading as something more noble and decisive, a laundering process in which I am expert. Still, if the close-proximity model – stay in my general area, pop around all the time, but if you don't mind awfully, don't leave stuff in my fridge and if you're in a mood (or I am) bugger off when I say so – is becoming increasingly popular, I can say with some confidence it works for me.

Emma Brockes is a Guardian columnist

An NDA from Harvey Weinstein cost me my career – at last, banning them feels within reach

Zelda Perkins

More than two decades ago, I walked into the offices of a law firm in Soho, my 24-year-old self confident that it would help me to expose and address the appalling behaviour of my then boss, the film producer Harvey Weinstein. His attempted rape of a new assistant while we were at the Venice film festival – on her first occasion alone with him – put me on the path I knew was right. The frightening but clear and proper course to justice.

But nothing could have prepared me for the ways in which the legal system would fail my colleague and me so thoroughly, or for the irreversible impact of entering – on our law firm's advice – into a damages contract containing extreme confidentiality clauses, otherwise known as a non-disclosure agreement, or NDA.


▲ *Samantha Morton (left) stars as Zelda Perkins and Zoe Kazan as journalist Jodi Kantor in a scene from the film She Said, about the journalists who broke the Harvey Weinstein story. Photograph: Universal Pictures/AP*

Due to the enormous disparity of power and wealth between Weinstein and ourselves, we were given no choice but to sign the agreement. The NDA not only forbade us from talking about Weinstein's behaviour, but also about our entire career at Miramax – to family, friends, medical practitioners including therapists, even to HMRC if questioned about the damages payment. We were to use our "best endeavours" to limit what we said in anyfuture criminal or civil action taken against him, and let him know if we were approached . We were not even allowed to have a copy of the document that was to control our lives "in perpetuity". And it seemed clear to us that we could face jail and financial ruin if we breached it.

My attempt to report on Weinstein's behaviour cost me my career. While he collected Oscars, I endured job interviews where men openly questioned me about my "relationship" with Weinstein, but I was gagged from telling the truth. The inability to find a job or speak freely drove me to move my life abroad.

Today Weinstein is in an LA jail, awaiting a verdict from an LA court at his second trial for sexual assault and rape. He is already serving 23 years for sexual assault. She Said, the film about the two New York Times journalists who broke the story, is playing in cinemas around the world, exposing how his reign of terror came to be and the mechanisms that protected him. So why am I still having to talk about this issue, five years on from breaking my NDA to those New York Times journalists? I had believed that by uncovering the system that enabled Weins-


▲ *Zelda Perkins, former personal assistant to Harvey Weinstein, speaks to Parliament's women and equalities committee in 2018. Photograph: Reuters*

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tein and others in power, things would change. In many places they have, but not here in the UK.

Over the past 25 years NDAs have become the default solution for settling cases of sexual misconduct, racism, pregnancy discrimination and many other human rights violations. They are sold as helping the victim by protecting their name, where in fact a simple one-sided confidentiality clause would do that. In reality NDAs serve only to protect an employer's reputation and the career of the perpetrator, allowing abusers to continue their behaviour while victims lose both their jobs and the ability to warn others about the individual or the workplace. Settling an employment dispute involves agreeing not to take any further legal action – it should not be a deal to protect or hide abuse.

In 2018 I, along with others, gave testimony to the women and equalities select committee about how NDAs were being abused in the UK. The Conservative government vowed it would "end NDAs being used unethically" but the recommendations of the select committee and the following consultation by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy were ignored. Not one change has been made. And so in workplaces across the country, abusers are still protected – and every week my email inbox is full of desperate messages from people (mostly women) being forced into silence.

They come from all industries – media organisations, corporations and public services. From the testimonies and data we are collecting, we know that NDAs also have a disproportionate impact on those who are already vulnerable. Black women are three times more likely to sign an NDA than white women. Women are five times more likely to sign an NDA than men.

But it doesn't have to be like this, as we can see from progress in the US, Canada, Ireland and Australia. Over the last five years 15 US states have changed their legislation around NDAs and this November, in a historic move, Joe Biden supported a bill through Congress stopping the use of NDAs in cases of sexual misconduct. Ironically, on the same day, our deputy prime minister, Dominic Raab, claimed in the House of Commons, when questioned about an alleged NDA, that it was merely a "confidentiality agreement". As a lawyer, he well knows the two are one and the same.

Although it is shocking that in the UK the legal mechanism that protected Weinstein is still protecting abusers, there are glimmers of hope. Earlier this year the Department for Education, in conjunction with Can't Buy My Silence, the campaign I co-founded with Prof Julie Macfarlane in 2021, introduced a voluntary pledge for UK universities and colleges of higher education to stop using NDAs. So far 60% in Englandhave signed up, meaning 1.5 million students are protected from being gagged about abuse.

The common sense behind this call has clearly been heard elsewhere – as last week the Lords added an amendment to the new higher education freedom of speech bill, banning the use of NDAs in universities and colleges in cases of sexual harassment, bullying or discrimination. If this becomes law then there is an even clearer signal to our government that it is time to change the system and outlaw this legal tool in all workplaces. To add to this the government has just backed legislation that would make sexual harassment in the street a criminal offence – this is a huge stride, at last acknowledging and protecting women from the daily abuses they endure.

There is nothing ethical about a legal agreement that hides bullying, racism or any form of assault and works purely to protect powerful wrongdoers. It would be both morally correct and economically wise to ban the use of NDAs. What a legacy it would be if Rishi Sunak were to make all workplaces safer and more productive – protecting not just women but anyone who faces discrimination or harassment.

Zelda Perkins is the co-founder, with Julie Macfarlane, of Can't Buy My Silence, an organisation campaigning against the use of NDAs

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

If Harry and Meghan were hoping to change the royal family, they'll be disappointed

Stephen Bates

So this is what snowbound, strike-hit Britain needed on a Thursday morning: a rich and entitled couple living in agreeable circumstances in California bemoaning their treatment by the media, the royal family, courtiers, a woman in the crowd in Liverpool, Meghan's father and even the Queen by implication. Assailed by "them" and "they".

Yes, it's the Harry'n'Meghan show on Netflix again, another two and a half hours in which the Duke and Duchess of Sussex back resentfully into the limelight to reveal once more their truth, complete with home movies of their son Archie and copious intimate photographs showing them intruding on their own privacy.

So, what's new? Well, on this telling, they have been bullied and harassed out of The Firm they worked so hard for: five engagements in five days during their last week in Britain. And the cottage the Queen gave them in the grounds of Kensington Palace was really rather pokey. They made so many sacrifices for this country.

There are details about the negotiations with the Queen, Charles and William in early 2020, with his big brother shouting at him. They were denied the chance to be part-time royals bowing into and out of their duties. Perhaps that's true; perhaps The Firm is behind the times on employment law.



▲ *'Was it worth it for Harry and Meghan? That depends what they were hoping for.' Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/AP*

They said William's communications team briefed against them. That may be the case and it wouldn't be the first time: old-timers remember Charles v Diana: the War of the Waleses and the dark arts of Charles's communications chief, Mark Bolland, 20 years ago.

But they assign blame a bit too liberally. Some, though far from all, of the coverage of Harry and Meghan in some of the tabloids, particularly their bete noir, the Daily Mail, was pretty hateful – but it should be noted that many of the headlines flashing across the screen in the documentaries are not from the British media, but scandal sheets such as the National Enquirer in the US. The retaliation by Meghan's friends – "the truth about Meghan" – was also planted, in People magazine.

As a former royal correspondent, albeit from some years ago, I find some elements of what they say jarring. I don't recognise the "constant briefings" of royal reporters, and stories endlessly planted. I remember it being quite hard to get any information out of the palace and briefings about royal tours. The media picks things up: it quickly discerned that not all was well between the royal brothers, or with Meghan. Should they not have reported that?

So, as the final episode plays out, was it worth it? Will the series alter things for the royals? My feeling is not: monarchists here and around the world already know much of this stuff, and either discount it or tut and move on. Republicans, meanwhile, will merely be confirmed in their view of an outdated, antiquated and out-of-touch institution.

Was it worth it for Harry and Meghan? That depends what they were hoping for. In Britain, Harry's approval ratings have sunk since he left the country, but it may give them the profile to mine lucrative celebrity elsewhere. He may, if he's feeling uniquely hard done by, be comforted to see what the British public thought of his great-great-uncle Edward VIII when he abdicated for the woman he loved. The letters written to the palace in 1936, preserved in the National Archives at Kew, are quite as abusive as anything Harry and Meghan endured on social media.

So was it all worth it for Netflix? The streaming giants must be happy that last week's instalments became its highest viewed documentary premiere and Britain's most popular TV series of 2022. Presumably there's a return to be made on that, for them and for the co-producers, the Sussex's media company, Archewell.

But will there be more happy returns in the future? Have Harry and Meghan got more to say that will drive sales and damage the institution, or have they shot their bolt? That's the cliffhanger now. The royal soap opera will continue; for all the uncertainties, that's inevitable. The challenge for the US cast members will be finding ways to stay in it.

Stephen Bates is the Guardian's former royal correspondent. His latest book is The Shortest History of The Crown (the institution rather than the series)

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

Bad grandmas are the new pop culture icons – and about time too

Sally Feldman

Move over, femmes fatales, heartbreakers, wonder women and teenage rebels. There's a new screen heroine jostling for a place: the bad grandmother. A growing resistance to the tired grandma trope in popular culture as frail, lonely and hobbling is popping up in surprising places. And it's about time.

This week, the second film in David Walliams's Gangsta Granny franchise will come to the BBC, to the delight of thousands of children enthralled by the transformation of a Scrabble-playing, fussy old lady who smells of cabbage into an international jewel thief known as the Black Cat.

On the big screen, this new style of grandmother is already well established. Bad Grandmas features four seemingly unremarkable women whose

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quiet, conventional lives are upended when they accidentally kill a sleazy insurance agent. Lucky Grandma follows a Chinese American whose favourite pastimes are smoking and gambling. And in Lee Isaac Chung's Minari, grandma Soon-ja is prone to swearing, wearing men's underwear and sneaking money from the church collection tray. In The Proposal,Grandma Annie, played by Betty White, takes the grandchildren to see male strippers, and fakes heart attacks to get out of trouble.

And it's not just on film and television that older women are railing against invisibility. In North America, the social activist group Raging Grannies campaigns on peace and environmental causes, challenging stereotypical views of older women and the assumption that political action is only for the young.

These pioneers are exemplars of what the pop culture critic Matt Brennan calls the Bad Grandma syndrome. "Unapologetic and at times unexpectedly crass, stylish, successful, and independent, the Bad Grandma resists the erasure of older women in American society by refusing to become invisible," he says. "[She] recognises that feminism is a lifelong struggle, not a war that's been won. And she'll keep on fighting to the bitter end, ardently refusing to go quietly."



▲ *Birmingham Stage Company's Gangsta Granny, by David Walliams. Photograph: Mark Douet*

Foremost among them is Ellie Reed, the character played by Lily Tomlin in Grandma, a seventysomething lesbian academic, poet and fearless feminist who is intent on "transmogrifying her life". Tomlin also shines as Frankie to Jane Fonda's Grace in the comedy series Grace and Frankie–Netflix's longest-running show – whose success lies in its appeal to a growing, indignant audience of baby boomer feminists. Independent, feisty and outspoken, the two characters refuse to bow to traditional expectations. Instead they relish the joys of growing older and aren't afraid of tackling normally taboo subjects. They praise the Rise Up toilet and yam lube, and extol the virtues of the Ménage à Moi vibrator for women with arthritis. "I'm a big fan of vibrators," Fonda has admitted.

This new breed of grandmothers is beginning to make an appearance in literature, too, most recently in Miriam Toews's novel Fight Night.When nine-year-old Swiv is expelled from school for fighting, her outlandish grandma takes on the task of home schooling with her own eccentric curriculum, based on the importance of fighting. "Fighting can be making peace," she teaches. "Fighting can be going small."

For sheer zaniness meet Stephanie Plum's grandmother in Janet Evanovich's series of crime capers. Grandma Mazur spends her social security cheques on essentials – such as bowling shoes – and occasionally watches pay-per-view porn, on the grounds that "the Weather Channel doesn't have enough action". She goes to funerals for entertainment and carries her .45 long barrel with her at all times, unregistered of course.

They may not be quite as extreme as Grandma Mazur, but each of the three protagonists in Salley Vickers's recent novel Grandmothers is unconventional in her own way. Blanche is a story-weaver and wannabe artist. Minna is a hermit. Nan may seem like the traditional granny, full of homespun wisdoms and comfort food, but secretly she's a published poet with a male pseudonym.

Surprising grandmothers abound in books for children, too. Mairi Hedderwick offers two contrasting versions in her Katie Morag series. Tough, stubborn Grannie Island works her own land and sports dungarees while fixing her tractor. Granma Mainland is a fashionable town lady who's more interested in clothes and shopping. For sheer unrestrained nastiness, there's Anthony Horowitz's Granny,who looks repulsive, smells of decomposing sheep, and is out to destroy her hated grandson. Meanwhile Roald Dahl's cigar-puffing grandmother in The Witchesdevises an elaborate plot to thwart the witches' evil campaign to eliminate all children.



▲ *Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda in the Netflix comedy Grace and Frankie, 2022. Photograph: Suzanne Tenner/Ali Goldstein*

But you don't need to steal the crown jewels, squander the family income at the casino, hunt down witches or swap vibrators with your best friends to be a raging granny. Older women these days are, as Annie Lennox sings, "doing it for themselves". The generation who demanded rights and equal opportunities 50 years ago are now revelling in yet another liberation. They are, with pride and passion, celebrating their coming of age.

Sally Feldman is writing a book of advice on how to be a (nearly) perfect grandmother

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

How I'm planning for a conscious Christmas – without depriving my kids of joy and wonder

Sarah Ayoub

Some time ago, my husband and I read about children from lower socio-economic backgrounds who felt left out or let down this time of year because "Santa" had got them something much smaller or less extravagant than what he had got their friends. It was a revelation that broke my heart, and it prompted us to revise the way we approach Christmas with our own children: making the more expensive presents as gifts courtesy of mum and dad, and the less expensive – but certainly still fun – gifts as presents that came from Santa.

It was our way of celebrating this period a little more consciously and ethically: taking great care not to deprive our own children of the joy and sparkle of the season, while also demonstrating that it's a time for us to think of others who might not be able to take part in the festivities in the way that they would like.

This year, after rising interest rates and soaring inflation, this approach seems especially pertinent. A recent survey suggests that just over half of Australia's population will use their savings to fund festive spending this year, while 24% will have to go into debt to cover their Christmas costs. This includes 13% who will rely on their credit card and 9% who will use buy-now-pay-later services in order to keep up with the demands of the period.

But can we find an alternative to these demands?

Although it might be easier said than done, child psychologist Deirdre Brandner says it's important not to



▲ *'It's wise to approach the season with balance, by having conversations in the lead-up to Christmas that manage your child's expectations.' Photograph: Mark Evans/Getty Images*

get caught up in the "impossible 'rose-tinted' images of the 'perfect family Christmas'".

"We can be so influenced by social media and the commercial nature of the holiday season that we create unrealistic expectations for ourselves and gift giving," she says. "Christmas is more than just presents [and] research shows that the most positive memories children have of Christmas is actually the special traditions that you do as family year after year, both in the lead-up and on the day itself.

"Don't fall for 'pester power' or buy too many gifts because you want your child to have 'the best Christmas ever'. You need to be mindful of peer pressure or marketing material, and [know that] it is OK for children to feel disappointed. There's always next year, or the one after. Excess creates indulged individuals and even higher expectations next year."

She says it's wise to approach the season with balance, by having conversations in the lead-up to Christmas that manage your child's expectations. She acknowledges that it can break a parent's heart when they can't provide their child with a gift they love, but says it's important for parents to be the ones setting the values and boundaries around gift-giving rather than the other way around.

"Parents need to prepare their children beforehand if they can't afford the gifts on their children's wish list," she explains. "Children need to learn how to respond and cope when they receive a gift that is not what they wanted or asked for. Helping them reflect on all the things they love about Christmas besides gifts can assist in the enjoyment [and in the making] of memories and rituals."

And if the big man in red is complicating matters in your household – with a child holding out hope for an extravagant gift that just won't make the budget? Brandner says it's difficult, but that we need to consider changing the narrative around kids getting everything they want from Santa.

"Lots of children want to know why Santa gives more to other kids," she explains. "They think they weren't good enough or that Santa didn't like them as much. Children should know that Santa will bring you something lovely but he doesn't always bring what you ask for. Tell your child [that] Santa needs a whole list to choose from and Santa *tries* to get at least one thing on the list."

She advises not buying too much when children are really little, and making sure your children know that not all presents come from Santa. She also recommends sticking to the "four-gift rule" – "something to wear, something to read, something they want, and something they need".

And for those who can afford to go that extra mile? She suggests celebrating while also thinking about ways that they can still mark the season in a way that is more conscious of others and the environment, and that reflect your family values. She suggests sponsoring a family, making a commitment to an environmental cause, pledging to volunteer time or service to a charity in the new year, or considering the gift of food or time with loved ones and friends as a way to give in a meaningful way.

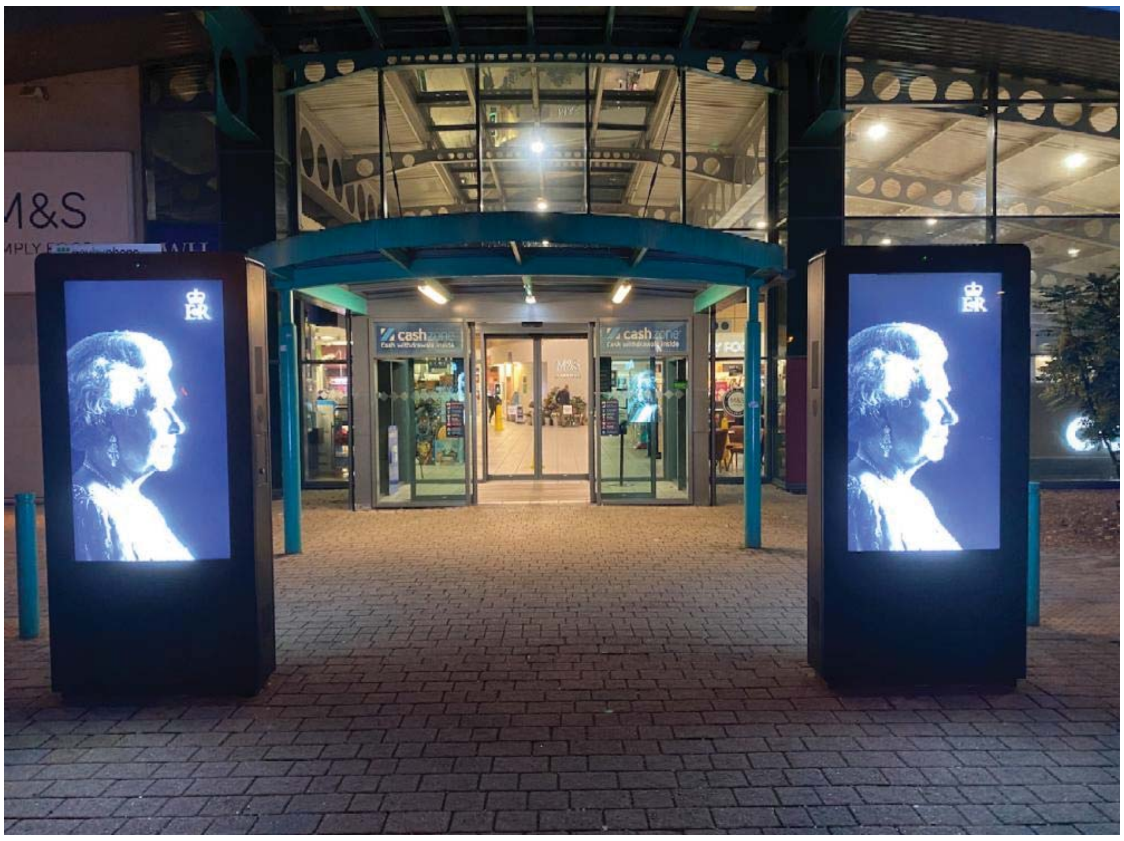
"Christmas time is an excellent opportunity to teach our children to develop gratitude, build empathy and demonstrate caring and [giving] back," she says. "We all have the potential for kindness and generosity. Awareness of conscious gift-giving is the first step [and] as parents we can model this behaviour."

● Sarah Ayoub is a journalist, academic and author of books for young adults and children

I thought mourning the Queen would be a personal choice. Then I saw the billboards

Billy Bragg

I learned the Queen was gravely ill while travelling on a train in Germany. It was several hours before the official announcement of her death; at this point, doctors were "concerned" for her health. But the image of a BBC newsreader in black tie and jacket gave the game away. This was the moment that the national broadcaster had been nervously rehearsing for decades. Strict protocols were in place to ensure no embarrassments. If the BBC had gone to black tie, I thought, Her Majesty must have already passed.By the time I reached my gig that evening, the announcement had been made. I sat up late into the night, watching reactions to the news on TV. Flying home the next day, I wasn't sure what to expect. Would people be sombre or shocked? Flags flew at half-mast, but Heathrow was as bustling as ever and, driving home to Dorset, things looked pretty much as they always did.Stopping for coffee at Winchester services on the M3, I got my first taste of the mood that would come to dominate the following days. Either side of the entrance to the food hall, the video billboards that usually advertised the delights available within now showed a portrait of the Queen, alternating with her royal cypher and her dates, 1926-2022. I took a photo and sent it to my brother-in-law. I found it hard not to see it as a crass attempt by advertising companies to jump on the bandwagon of national grieving. As I drove on into the night, a long-planned campaign was being put into action, its aim to ensure that we all participated in mourning the loss of the Queen.What to make of patriotism? To paraphrase Martin Luther King, the arc of history is long, but it bends towards inclusivity. It's why corporations believe they can reach a younger demographic by commissioning ads that celebrate diversity, why the National Trust seeks to highlight the connection between slavery and stately homes, and why there is a plus sign at the end of LGBTQ.Patriotism chafes against this trend. Resistant to change, reliant on conformity, it takes pride in immutable symbols and institutions, such as the flag and the armed forces, and prizes assimilation over diversity. While inclusivity presents as an invitation, patriotism is at best an expectation and at worst a demand. Are you with us or against us?I found it hard to disentangle the period of official solemnity from the politics of this country over the past decade. This was a time when those who seemed determined to offend were elevated to the highest offices in the land, using dog-whistles to stir up division. Attempts to have a deeper understanding of our colonial past were met with outrage and reaction. Millions were put through privation and economic hardship. The flag was waved by our politicians more and more, making it mean less and less. Britain became ever more inhospitable to those who choose to make their homes here.



▲ *'The two dark sentinels standing guard at Winchester on that September night seemed to silently insist that, before entering, we bow our heads in respect of a version of our national story' Photograph: Billy Bragg/The Guardian*

The two dark sentinels standing guard at Winchester on that September night seemed to silently insist that, before entering, we bow our heads in respect of a version of our national story – but who decides on that story? And where is it going?For those on the outside looking in, it will take more than the coronation of a new king to bring the country together. In order to feel that they belong, people need to see themselves as part of the national narrative and feel that their experiences are being treated with respect. That is simply not achievable at a time when politics rewards those bent on exclusion.

Billy Bragg is a singer-songwriter and activist

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

Thanks to you, my glasses no longer slip down my nose. If only it didn't hurt too much to wear them

Adrian Chiles

Unaccountably, I woke up early the other morning with the song China in Your Hand by T'Pau ringing in my ears. Odd that. Not heard or thought about it for years. I put it on.

"Don't push too far, your dreams are china in your hand," Carol Decker advises, adding, "Don't wish too hard because they may come true." She sings the truth.

Only last month, you Guardian readers made a dream of mine come true. Very decent of you, but I wish you hadn't. I'd written a moving, heartfelt, anguished piece about my lifelong struggle to stop my spectacles continually slipping down my nose. This elicited a variety of responses, some of which weren't ungenerous. Advice, if not sympathy, came my way. One suggestion was to buy these little thingies you attach to the end of the arms of the glasses to keep them in solid position behind your ears.



▲ *Turns out there are worse things than insecurely attached spectacles. Photograph: Posed by model. DjelicS/Getty Images*

They worked. Oh joy. I walked to the shops and the specs stayed in place. On the way home I broke into a run. They didn't move. Even a quick pogo around didn't shift them. My life had changed. But within a week a sharp pain developed around the bridge of my nose. Before long a dramatic kind of sore had developed. Oh no – I knew it was all going too well.

This, it turned out, was an acanthoma fissuratum. According to DermNet, this is "an uncommon condition that occurs in people who wear glasses", presenting as "a firm flesh-coloured papule, nodule or plaque that has a central furrow dividing the lesion in half". Luckily, there is a cure: not wearing your specs for a while. At least I don't need a prescription for that. When I go back to glasses, it will have to be without the little thingies. It's a shame – we were good together.

Adrian Chiles is a writer, broadcaster and a Guardian columnist

I walked to the shops and my specs stayed in place. Oh joy

The 20 greatest Christmas albums – ranked!

Alexis Petridis

20. The Roches – We Three Kings (1990)
The US avant-folk trio began their musical career carol singing, which makes We Three Kings a kind of back-to-their-roots enterprise. Quite sparsely arranged, it allows the Roche sisters' harmonies to dazzle – the acappella Star of Wonder is magical – while their New York-accented Winter Wonderland is an absolute hoot.

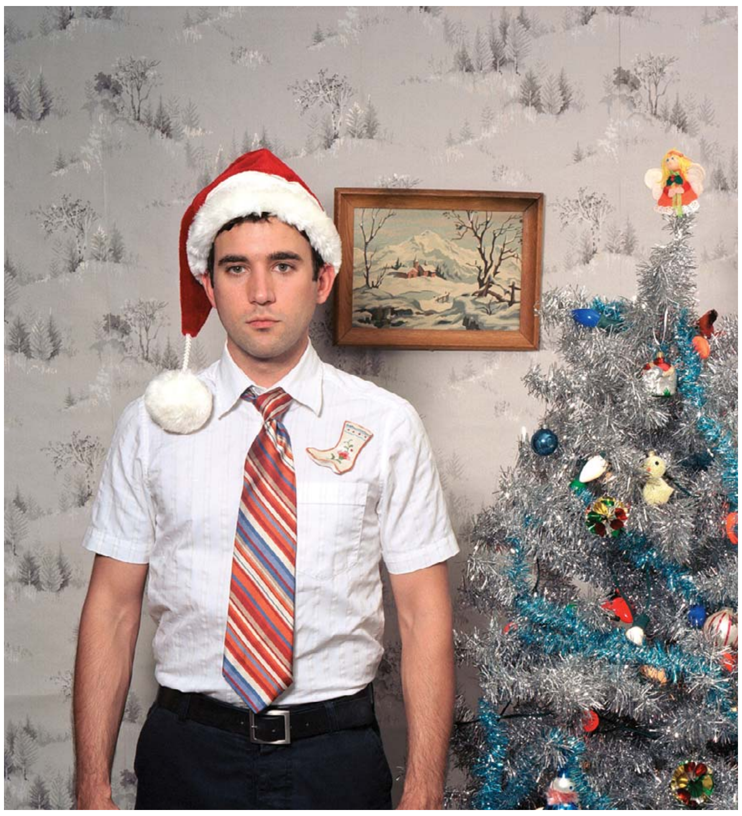
19. Various artists – Something Festive (1968)
In which the cream of A&M Records' easy listening artists – Herb Alpert, Burt Bacharach and Sérgio Mendez among them – offer up a Christmas album as velvety-smooth as eggnog. The highlight: Claudine Longet's delicate confection of strings, acoustic guitar and breathy vocals, Snow.

18. Various artists – Ghosts of Christmas Past (1981)
That most improbable of things: a post-punk Christmas album, that features Aztec Camera doing a Django Reinhardt-inspired instrumental, a selection of Factory Records alumni and San Franciscan oddballs Tuxedomoon. The Durutti Column's implausibly beautiful Snowflakes is a standout.

17. James Brown – Hey America (1970)
James Brown made three Christmas albums, but the last one earns its place here by dint of being the weirdest. The issue isn't the music – a string-laden take on funk – but Brown himself, who appears to be making up the words to every song as he goes along, with bewildering results.

16. Bob Dylan – Christmas in the Heart (2009)
An honest, heartfelt expression of faith and seasonal cheer? A concerted effort to snatch the title of most bizarre Christmas album from James Brown's aforementioned Hey America? Untangling the thought processes and motivation behind Christmas in the Heart is a tough call, but the crazed Must Be Santa is a once-heard, never-forgotten experience.

15. Various artists – A John Waters Christmas (2004)
You might expect gleeful schlock from film director John Waters, and there's plenty of it here – singing kids, the Chipmunks, Rudolph and the Gang's sweary Here Comes Fatty Claus – but the genius of A John Waters Christmas is how he mixes the weirdness and laughs with sheer loveliness, as on Stormy Weather's doo-wop Christmas Time Is Coming.



▲ *Weary optimism … Sufjan Stevens. Photograph: Denny Renshaw*

14. Various artists – A LaFace Family Christmas (1993)
This compilation earned its place in history by featuring the first track ever released by OutKast, Player's Ball. The track, an ultra-funky saga of a harassed drug dealer's Christmas Day, is undoubtedly the highlight, but TLC's All I Want for Christmas and Toni Braxton's classy take on The Christmas Song run it surprisingly close.

13. Sufjan Stevens – Songs for Christmas (2006)
A 42-track compilation that charts Stevens' progress from shambolic folk-rocker to baroque pop mastermind. He sings carols with conviction, but it's the tunes he wrote himself that really hit home – not least the cheeringly realistic Get Behind Me, Santa!, which expresses weary optimism regarding the festive season: "It's a fact of life whether you like it or not – so put your hands together and give it a shot."

12. Kacey Musgraves – A Very Kacey Christmas (2016)
A perfectly balanced seasonal feast, where kitsch – I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas – coexists with heartbreak set to weeping pedal steel guitar on Christmas Makes Me Cry, and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer meets A Willie Nice Christmas, a weed-addled duet with Willie Nelson that urges listeners to get "higher than the angel on top of the tree".

11. Loretta Lynn – Country Christmas (1966)
The country star's first Christmas album is just fantastic: hushed carols, an ample helping of sass (To Heck With Ole Santa Claus, I Won't Decorate Your Christmas Tree) and, best of all, unadulterated tears-in-the-tinsel misery on Gift of the Blues and Christmas Without Daddy.

10. Various artists – A Motown Christmas (1973)
The Jackson 5's Santa Claus Is Coming to Town is exuberance bottled; Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen intriguingly jazzy. The star, though, is Stevie Wonder: his original version of Someday at Christmas crushes Lizzo's current cover, and his more upbeat What Christmas Means to Me is a joy.

9. Elvis Presley – Elvis' Christmas Album (1957)
The first, and best, of Elvis's seasonal offerings, made when Presley was still within touching distance of his early, raw rockabilly years: listen to the intense, bluesy opener, Santa Claus Is Back in Town, for proof. There's also gospel on offer and masterful ballads: the version of I'll Be Home for Christmas is genuinely heartbreaking.

8. The Beach Boys – The Beach Boys' Christmas Album (1964)
The Beach Boys' Christmas Album was recorded as Brian Wilson's talents caught fire – taped around the same time as 1965's awesome The Beach Boys Today! And side one, where the Wilson originals lurk, is studded with gems: Merry Christmas, Baby and Christmas Day in particular show how great he was, even when ostensibly knocking something off to order.

7. Tracey Thorn – Tinsel and Lights (2012)
The exquisite melancholy of Thorn's voice turns out to be perfectly suited to a superbly curated selection of seasonal songs. The brass-assisted version of Joni Mitchell's River – Christmas-adjacent rather than a Christmas song per se – is gorgeous. Her take on Like a Snowman, written by the Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt, is even better.

6. Various artists – A Christmas Record (1981)
The grandparent of all left-field Christmas albums, featuring Ze Records' post-punk/post-disco roster: it's variously funky (August Darnell's fabulous Christmas on Riverside Drive), blackly comic (Cristina's Things Fall Apart) and unsettling (Suicide's Hey Lord). Despite the air of hipster snark, it produced a genuine mainstream seasonal classic: the Waitresses' delightful Christmas Wrapping.

5. Low – Christmas (1999)
If you want an American indie take on the festive album, this is the one. The fuzzed-out Little Drummer Boy is magical, but the killer is Just Like Christmas, a lo-fi version of the Phil Spector sound, utterly joyous despite its depiction of tour-related misery: "The snow was gone, we got lost … it was just like Christmas."

4. Rotary Connection – Peace (1968)
A Christmas album you could listen to all year round: a baroque psychedelic soul opus packed with lavish, adventurous orchestration courtesy of producer Charles Stepney, plus Hendrix-y guitar solos (it features the most freaked-out version of Silent Night imaginable) and Minnie Riperton's heavenly voice.



▲ *TLC in 1992. Photograph: Al Pereira/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images*

3. Various artists – A Christmas Gift for You From Phil Spector (1963)
To shun A Christmas Gift for You because of Phil Spector's toxicity would be to deny the incredible work of the artists involved. Listen to Darlene Love's beseeching voice on Christmas (Baby Please Come Home) and the poised blend of cuteness and toughness the Ronettes bring to Sleigh Ride, and it's hard not to succumb.

2. Ella Fitzgerald – Ella Wishes You a Swinging Christmas (1960)
An album so good, it can leave you faintly baffled: how did she make Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas so, well, *sexy*? Ella Wishes You a Swinging Christmas is a triumph from start to finish – no schmaltz, no excess, just one beautiful arrangement and incredible, seemingly effortless vocal after another.

1. Vince Guaraldi Trio– A Charlie Brown Christmas (1965)
In the US, the short film A Charlie Brown Christmas is an annual TV ritual. Here, the cartoon is less well known, but that doesn't diminish the power of its soundtrack, where west coast jazz pianist Vince Guaraldi manages to capture virtually every emotion Christmas can inspire, from childlike wonder on Skating to the profound sadness that undercuts its theme song, Christmas Time Is Here. People's preferences in Christmas music tend to be even more deeply personal than usual, bound up with memories and family traditions, but the music on A Charlie Brown Christmas sweeps everyone under its tree skirt: it is alternately sophisticated and as rough-hewn as a school nativity play, but always spellbinding.

'I didn't realise how badly it affected me until I was off it': what it's like to have a social media detox

Emine Saner

It was when Mehret Biruk lost two hours of her life to Instagram that she knew the time had come to escape. What had she been looking at? She couldn't even remember in the moments immediately afterwards. Instagram, she recalls thinking, was "winning the war on my attention". The irony was that Biruk had returned to the photo and video-sharing platform only some months earlier, after a three-year break. And she had only returned to promote her website and newsletter, in which she writes about the benefits of spending less time online. She hoped to reach the people who might want help. Instead, she found herself getting sucked back in. "That's the scary part to me. It was just instantly back to scrolling, and waiting for the likes and comments."

In August, the actor Tom Holland posted a video on Instagram saying he was taking a break from the platform and Twitter, because he found them overstimulating and overwhelming. "I get caught up and I spiral when I read things about me online and ultimately, it's very detrimental to my mental health," he said. Others, such as the singer Lizzo and actor Selena Gomez, have previously announced breaks.

Earlier this year, one study suggested a week-long hiatus was enough to have a positive effect. In a group randomly selected to take a break from platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, researchers found that symptoms of depression and anxiety had reduced, and overall wellbeing increased.

Would a longer period have an even bigger impact? "We're still trying to understand whether taking a longer break has longer-term benefits for people," says Jeffrey Lambert, lecturer in health and exercise psychology at the University of Bath, who carried out the research. "For a lot of people, just taking that one-week break gave them

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an opportunity to reflect on how much they were using social media, and their reasons for using it. Were they using it mindlessly, just scrolling? Or were they using it for a positive purpose, to connect meaningfully with friends or family".

The researchers interviewed some of the participants a year later. "There were some people that did continue to stay off social media," says Lambert. "Some went back to it but created certain rules for themselves around how they would engage with it. Maybe they deleted the apps off their phone, or they decided not to use it in the morning when they first woke up."

This was the case for Korkor Kanor, a public relations executive, who was on Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat and found it had become overwhelming and time-consuming. "I couldn't put my phone down without getting a notification," she says. Sometimes she would turn the notifications off, "but you find yourself returning – people messaged me, because I was using it as an alternative to giving out my phone number". Kanor found Twitter had become a burden, "especially during the pandemic – it was so much to face every day." She felt a pressure to tweet, particularly about social justice because, she says, "your silence is seen as some kind of compliance. So I just removed myself from that space altogether. It's hard, because you do want to speak, but in a safe space among people that you know and trust, and you can exchange ideas peacefully, not reactively."

Kanor deleted Snapchat, and came off Twitter and Instagram for around nine months. The endless scrolling, she realised, "took a lot of energy; it would be a huge source of stimuli that would drain me and I didn't realise it until I stopped using it". During her break, she says, she noticed she had "more energy and I was able to hold conversations with people, and not be distracted. I was way more balanced emotionally." Looking back, she realises, sad or troubling posts affected her own moods without her realising.

When she did go back to social media, it was with changes. She doesn't use Twitter as much as she did, and on Instagram she has changed who can see her posts. She also intends to schedule regular breaks from social media, with another one this month. "I can't be on it regularly any more," she says. "I don't think that's healthy for me because it becomes really overstimulating. I feel a lot better when I'm off and then I'm like: 'Let's see what's going on.'"

For Sneha Morjaria, a management consultant, having a social media break also allowed her to create new rules once she went back. After she was diagnosed with depression and anxiety, her therapist advised deleting social media



▲ *Photograph: Diy13/Getty Images/iStockphoto*

apps. She had mainly used Instagram and TikTok. "If I was at a family dinner, I'd be that person randomly scrolling and not paying attention. It just made me really stressed. You're always comparing yourself to other people – someone's on holiday, someone's done this. You wouldn't invite hundreds of people into your home but that space in your head is your home, and you're inviting hundreds of people there as you scroll past, watching them." She found, she says, "you can forget who you are as a person, what your opinions are, what your values are. I didn't realise how badly it had affected me until I was off it."

She took more than four months off and is now using social media again, but with rules. For her business account, Morjaria employed someone else to handle it, and on her personal account she only follows people she knows personally. "I put a timer on my phone, so I don't spend more than 30 minutes a day on Instagram."

Social media, says clinical psychologist Dr Roberta Babb, can be overwhelming. "We have access to vast amounts of information. It is both controllable and uncontrollable – you can actively search for stuff but also things pop up in your timeline, you get notifications, so there is the sense of being out of control." It is also never off – even if you take a break, you know it's going on without you. "Then people worry they're going to miss out on something so they keep looking. Because of the context we're living in at the moment, we're also aware that things change so quickly. How the world was when you woke up, for example, may not be the same world when you leave work."

By spending too long on social media, she says, users are "exposing themselves to quite a lot of negative, traumatic stuff. The balance between good things and not-so-good things isn't equal, and that can be quite traumatic for people and trigger things for them that may be painful, unresolved or quite raw." And when we compare ourselves with other people's lives, as presented on social media, we hardly ever come off well, Babb points out. Even though we know we're looking at other people's highlights, which might even be staged, "it's hard to hold that in mind when you're looking at an image. That then further exacerbates any feelings of negativity. It can be quite damaging in terms of really denting people's confidence and self-esteem and because it's so prevalent and pervasive, it's corrosive, it slowly chips away at people." She likes the idea of a break, saying it can help you "reconnect with who you are, what's important to you, and give you more confidence in thinking you have a choice as to what information you access. What do you want to learn about? As opposed to feeling that you're a passive recipient of all this information that's washing around the internet."

For some, the break seems permanent. Eddie Coram-James took a year off social media, then returned for another year before leaving around six months ago. "I would be having conversations with my girlfriend and actually I would be looking at my phone, and not only was that bad for my relationships, it also meant that there was no space in my life any more." He felt it was affecting his ability to concentrate: "It was making me more restless. When I was on a train, immediately I would bring my phone out. Whenever there was a moment that wasn't filled with something, my phone would come out and I would start flicking through this absolute garbage."

Although he came off it, Coram-James admits it is "a bit peculiar" that he runs a digital marketing agency, of which social media is a key part. "I just became deeply uncomfortable with what social media is, how it's targeting people, the kind of data that they're using in order to do that. The penny truly dropped that this wasn't actually some benign thing, just some fun – the users are the product, and you are being sold, and then sold to, in really full-on ways." In terms of the world his business operates in, he says, "whereas I take no issue with making sure that an ad gets in front of a demographically appropriate group, this has been pushed to its limits. 'Relationship targeting' – where your phone identifies which people you spend the most time with, and so those people start getting ads appropriate for you, so that they strike up a conversation with you about it – is perhaps the most egregious example of this."

Is it not a little hypocritical to work in social media if he thinks it's harmful? "I think it's harmful to me. I don't go around lecturing people, because I have no idea what their experience is. I'm someone that really appreciates space and time, and trying not to fill my life with overstimulation. If I had a massive moral issue with it in general, then I would probably not offer it. That's not to say I don't have some serious questions about it. I do, and I think that over time, regulation will come in."

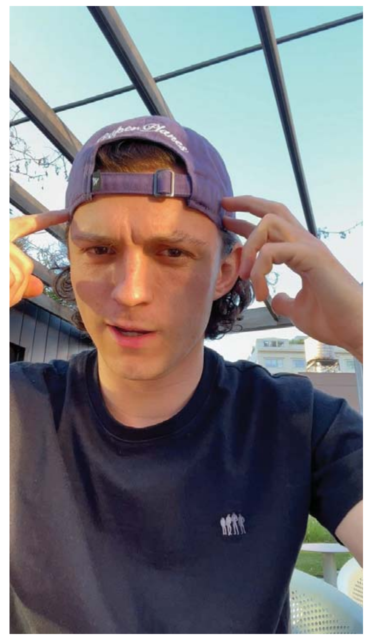
Gayle Macdonald, a sobriety coach, would use social media, mainly Instagram and Facebook, every day. "It would be the first thing that I looked at in the morning when I woke up, and the thing I looked at before I went to bed." Sometimes if she woke up in the middle of the night, she says, "I would sneak a look. It was just all-consuming."

She says she thought about social media much of the time: "wanting to do it, not wanting to do it, feeling guilty for being on it, feeling guilty for not being on it, planning when I was going to be on there". It reminded her of something else – a time in her life when alcohol had become a problem. "It was beginning to feel like my drinking before I stopped," she says. Macdonald took a break in February, deciding to do seven days to begin with. Although she felt anxious for the first couple of days, absent-mindedly picking up her phone before she remembered she had deleted the apps, she soon started to feel much better. She never went back.

In a new study, still under peer review, psychologists surveyed people who had taken social media detoxes. They found, on average, the participants had taken a break three times, and more than half had taken a detox lasting up to a week. "One of the reasons we were interested in it is because the term 'social media detox' is becoming more apparent," says David Robertson, lecturer in psychology at the University of Strathclyde and one of the authors of the study.

Are we approaching a point where people are factoring a regular detox into their social media usage? "That's the indication that we got from the study," says Robertson. "Rather than excessive social media use being an addictive compulsion, it was more like a self-regulated behaviour." People were taking breaks when they thought they were over-using it. "They were aware of the positive benefits to their sleep, anxiety, relationships and to their mood. They knew that those things would improve if they took a little break from social media."

People went back to social media, the study found, not out of an "addictive compulsion – it was more about the fear of missing out," says Robertson.



▲ *Tom Holland announcing his break from social media in a video on Instagram. Photograph: tomholland2013/Instagram*

"Or they were keen to see friends, or they were concerned that friends may not appreciate that they hadn't liked or commented on posts, or were missing key information about social groups." Many went back to the same level of usage as before, he says, "which again speaks to this idea of self-regulated behaviour, that they're able to take breaks as and when they want".

For a successful detox, he suggests telling your friends and family you'll still be available for texts and phone calls – fear of missing out was one reported concern that came up in the study. Distraction techniques could help. "Some people noted that one of the reasons they went back on social media was because they couldn't find an alternative activity to distract them. If you're taking a detox, try to replace it with something – seeing people in real life, that type of thing."

When Biruk was trying to leave Twitter, she counted down the 30 days it would take to lose the chance to reactivate her account with a cross each morning. "I remember on the 30th day putting that 'X' and being relieved – my account is gone and there's no going back," she says. That was three years ago. Now, she says, "I get to experience myself as is, without all the noise, without other people's lives constantly in my face, but also I don't try to constantly put myself in other people's faces. It's like a private existence that I really enjoy."

> *It took a lot of energy, it drained me, and I didn't realise it until I stopped using it*
>
> *Korkor Kanor*

The only thing that should influence the news is the news

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Harry & Meghan Volume 2 review – a remarkable reminder of how petty the royals can be

Leila Latif

As their Netflix series comes to an end, one thing is very clear: Harry and Meghan want us to view this as a love story. The two, for better or for worse, are hopeless romantics and at every stage reiterate just how much they adore one another. While that may have a fair few viewers rolling their eyes, the sweetness mixed in with salacious details makes for a satisfying happily-ever-after.

We begin typically where the fairytale would begin, on their wedding day. Meghan describes being calm and Harry recounts the events with his signature disbelief that he landed this woman. Even King Charles is talked about lovingly, with Meghan recalling just how charming he was in the wake of her estrangement from her own father and how much it meant for him to walk her down the aisle. A surprising amount of time is given to them gleefully rehashing the details, from Elton John's performance to the event's symbolism (Serena Williams overeggs the matter by describing it as "courageous"). The documentary's access brings in new photographs and footage of the wedding, which somewhat screams "Netflix exclusivity deal."

The two are equally effusive whenever the Queen comes up, studiously reiterating their respect for her (the programme was filmed before her death). And Prince Philip is only ever discussed in the most loving of terms; the two seem to want to emphasise that breaking off from the royal family did not mean rejecting family itself. But as the programme continues, the sweetness gives way to something far more interesting: it is clear that Meghan and Harry are furious.



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▲ *'The latter half is more critical of the palace itself' … King Charles, the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duchess and Duke of Sussex. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA*

In the years the programme covers we've not been short of royal content; decades after her death, Diana's "revenge dress" is still being dissected. This series continually draws parallels between Diana's experience and Harry and Meghan's, which are glaring. When footage of Diana appears she seems like a soothsayer, talking about how her popularity led to jealousy within her marriage and the palace – and giving her son and his wife a warning they should have heeded sooner.

That "jealousy" is where things take a turn for Meghan and Harry, and the programme claims things started to go wrong after they proved a hit on their tour of Australia, while Meghan was pregnant with Archie. As grand and imposing as the firm can seem, it's always remarkable to be reminded just how petty it can be. Where the first episodes placed the blame squarely at the feet of the British media, the latter half is more critical of the palace itself. While anyone who has taken a cursory glance at the tabloids can see how Meghan was condemned for what Kate was praised for (eating avocados or touching her pregnant belly), the show takes us step by step through how increasingly racist her portrayal became. As Prof David Olusoga explains, when it came to Meghan's race, "anger sells" and the tabloids partook in "outrage industrial complex". Harry appears particularly incensed by the way his wife was reported on, and keen to point out its racist undertones. At one point he plainly states: "If you can't see the difference, I can't help you." The documentary finally follows them through to the present day, where the couple are settled in California, enjoying their newfound freedom and large Netflix paycheques.

Meghan and Harry's story isn't one that can really provide much in terms of new information. Nearly every element has been reported on ad nauseam, from the meetings surrounding their departure, to her miscarriage, to the lawsuit against the Daily Mail. But the series still lands a punch because there are so many unlikely twists, with palace officials leaking information to scupper their plans, horrendous death threats, social media frenzies and the truly surreal role Tyler Perry played in their rescue. Fervent royalists will probably be outraged by Harry being so openly critical of his father and brother, but in the programme it seems that Meghan's mere existence is enough to infuriate many of them.

No matter your feelings about any of the royals, by the time the series shows us this happy couple and their two young children playing in the garden of their California home, you can't help but breathe a sigh of relief that they escaped. Even with their tendency towards the saccharine, and an extremely California way of expressing themselves, when they conclude that "love wins" it's clear that for the two of them, it really did.

Build the Wall blocks and Infowars whiskey: what the far right are gifting this Christmas

Arwa Mahdawi

'Tis the season of the gift guide. They're everywhere you look: 10 holiday presents for the dog enthusiast in your life! Fifteen great holiday ideas for the grumpy atheist in your life! Twelve cigar-themed knick-knacks you can buy your cigar-loving partner! And, of course, there are all the usual Him and Her gift guides. As one viral tweet put it: "There's no funnier caricature of masculinity than the Him from 'holiday gifts for him'. he doesn't drink any liquid but whiskey. he's got 20 watches on each wrist. if he saw a single texture other than leather he would throw one of his pocket knives at it."

Now, I don't normally do gift guides because I am a Serious Journalist who writes hard-hitting stories about pepper-spraying myself and cloning my dog. However, I'll make an exception this year because, truly, we are spoiled for choice when it comes to completely bonkers conservative merchandise.

Donald Trump's ascent in 2016 kicked off a boom in the extremism economy. The internet is littered with retailers like the Maga Mall and the Patriot Depot, selling everything from T-shirts with slogans like "Fully vaccinated by the blood of Jesus" to festive gun holsters. If you're trying to find a holiday present for the far-right extremist in your life, the options are endless, so I've curated a helpful list.



▲ *You name it, some enterprising Maga entrepreneur has slapped 'Let's Go Brandon' on it. Photograph: Freedom Speaks Up*

'Let's Go Brandon' wrapping paper

A couple of years ago, Brandon Brown was a mid-tier Nascar driver nobody except racing buffs had heard of. Due to a strange confluence of events, however (people yelling "fuck Joe Biden" at a race and a sports reporter trying to pretend the crowd was saying "let's go Brandon"), he became a catchphrase in the culture wars. You can find Let's Go Brandon bumper stickers, mugs, hats, cookies, condoms … you name it, some enterprising Maga entrepreneur has slapped "Let's Go Brandon" on it. You can even wrap your Brandon bounty in "Let's Go Brandon" wrapping paper. A Georgia company called Freedom Speaks Up claims it sold over 500,000 sq ft of the novelty wrapping paper last year and expects to double that number this year. "We're having tons of fun with this, there's no way to spend 20 bucks and get more smiles on Christmas morning," the CEO said in a statement. Heartwarming stuff. This is what Christmas is all about, eh?

A Trump Maga Build the Wall construction set

The Maga crowd still seem to think it's 2016 and can't drop their Trumpy catchphrases. If you'd like a little throwback toy, how about a Build the Wall construction set for just $19.95? Sold by the Patriot Depot, it's described as "the best-selling conservative toy of all time". I'm not sure what data this is



▲ *Photograph: Patriot Depot*

based on, but we'll just go with it, shall we? The marketing blurb also claims that "the Left needed psychiatric help after seeing the Build the Wall set for the first time. They are furious that it's back." Yep, I'm triggered over here. Going to need to find a safe space stat.

I think it's interesting that the Patriot Depot's tagline is "supplies for the conservative revolution". Apparently everyone's going to be playing with knock-off Lego in the conservative revolution. Which, you know, doesn't sound too bad.

A butt plug from Target

During a recent speech at the New York Young Republicans Club Gala,

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Marjorie Taylor Greene, the woman who once ranted about the "gazpacho police", shared some unsolicited thoughts about sex toys. "By the way, you can pick up a butt plug or a dildo at Target and CVS nowadays," the far-right Georgia congresswoman said. "I don't even know how we got here … This is the state that we're living in right now." I'm not sure this was supposed to be a gift idea for Young Republicans, but some people interpreted it as such. "Sounds like someone's giving her Secret Santa a hint!" Jimmy Kimmel joked.

Alex Jones's conspiracy-theory-themed whiskey

Every celebrity in the world has a booze brand these days. George Clooney has a tequila company, Ryan Reynolds launched a gin brand, Matthew McConaughey collaborated on a bourbon. I could go on – at this rate it would be quicker to make a list of celebrities who *haven't* plastered their names on a bottle of alcohol. Even D-list conspiracy theorists in trouble with the law are getting on the boozy bandwagon. Rumour has it that Alex Jones – the guy who was recently ordered to pay nearly $1.5bn in damages to the families of victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school mass shooting, after years of spreading lies about the tragedy on his Infowars show – will soon be releasing a whiskey. What's it called? Conspiracy, of course.

A cute little Trumpy Bear

Trumpy Bear, a 22in-long stuffed toy with a Trump-style toupee, first appeared on the scene in 2017 with a completely absurd commercial. "When America is great, business is great," says one man in the advert. "When business is great, I'm great. I love you, Trumpy Bear." Because this was all completely deranged, everyone assumed the bear was fake. It was not. It was a real product that retailed for about $60 and flew off the shelves during the holidays. "They're very popular gift items both for people who like and dislike the president," an executive from the Trumpy Bear company told the Cut. If you missed out on getting your hands on one while Trump was in office, you'll be glad to know the bear is still available. Presidents may come and go, but Trumpy Bear is for ever.

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Go on, trigger them. I dare you.

'I became more and more violent': shocking testimonies of abuse from IDF veterans

Chris McGreal

Sgt Gil Hillel flinches, awareness written across her face, as she looks to the camera and describes how the power of life and death over another human being changed her.

"Over time I became more and more violent. I went through a crazy transformation in that job. From a very calm and relaxed person to a very violent and aggressive person who takes their frustrations out on the object they can take it out on, which was the Palestinians and the detainees," said the former Israeli military police officer.

"I hit more, I was more abusive. I didn't really see them at all. They're invisible people you don't see."

As Hillel speaks, the voices of other Israel Defence Forces (IDF) veterans bubble away in the background on screens scattered around a New York city exhibition space. Each monitor speaks to a theme of the brutal reality of how Israel maintains its 55-year occupation and domination of the Palestinians.

The destruction of Arab homes as collective punishments. The physical abuse of arrested Palestinians. The humiliation of families at roadblocks because a soldier is having a bad day. Some of the hardest testimony comes about the abuse of children and the torture of detainees.

The faces of these soldiers – some grimacing at the thought of who they used to be, others blank and matter-of-fact – are among hundreds who have given testimony to Breaking the Silence, a group founded by Israeli combat veterans to document military abuses in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Breaking the Silence is well-known, and much vilified, in Israel. Ori Givati, a former Israeli tank commander and the group's advocacy director, said it



Attendees at Breaking the Silence. Photograph: Breaking the Silence

has brought the video testimonies to New York and Washington because Americans should know what $4.9bn in annual US military aid to Israel is paying for.

"The responsibility for the occupation is definitely on us Israelis but 100% as well on the US which is funding Israel with billions of dollars a year. The funding is making the US complicit in the occupation, and the people here must understand that this is what the funding is supporting," he said.

The Israeli government describes the IDF as "the most moral army in the world", claiming that it does more than any other military to avoid loss of civilian lives. But the accounts collected by Breaking the Silence show how morality was all too often subordinated to orders justified by claims that abuses were necessary for the survival of Israel.

Individually the testimonies are disturbing as soldiers describe a culture of dehumanisation and violence against Palestinians. Together they lay bare the relentless and often gratuitous cruelty of 55 years of occupation and the damage it does both to the occupied and the occupier.

The testimony is all the more powerful because it comes from Israelis who have put their lives on the line for their country. Soldiers recount orders to shoot unarmed protestors, the ease with which a mission to tear down a Palestinian flag results in the killing of a man who threw a stone, the taking over and destruction of Arab homes.

The Geneva conventions, which the UN and international criminal court say apply to the occupied territories, bar collective punishments. But they are routine.

First sergeant Erez Katsav recalled serving in the West Bank city of Nablus under orders to blow up any building that sheltered a suspected terrorist. Katsav tells how his unit found wanted Palestinians hiding in the elevator shaft of a 10-storey residential block. Its tenants were given an hour to collect their belongings and clear out.

"What bothered me was the excessive collectiveness of the punishment. It was a collective punishment in every sense of the word. I don't think the tenants on the top floor had anything to do with terrorists hiding in the elevator shaft. What's the point in razing a building with hundreds of people?" he asked.

Still, it is the testimony about violence against individuals that stands out.

First sergeant Idan Barir served with the artillery corps around Qalqilya where there were routine Palestinian protests against the occupation. The battalion commander told the soldiers he wanted them to "bring me Arabs' knees".

"None of us thought we'd heard correctly. He said, 'I know what I said. There are protesters and people throwing stones there, people causing problems, and we're going to take them down. You're going to bring me Arabs' knees on this deployment.' He used to stage ambushes with marksmen against stone throwers. He literally took out stone throwers' knees," said Barir.

On another screen, first sergeant Amit Lavie, recounted serving in the West Bank city of Hebron, a particularly tense fault line because of the forced removal of Palestinians to make way for religious Jewish settlers. He was part of a unit that detained a group of Palestinians who were handed over to the Israeli border police.

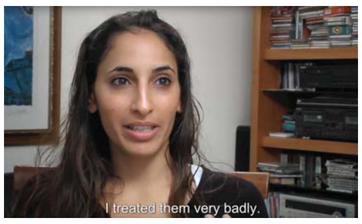
"Before we realised what was going on they started beating them. Kicking, punching. One of the border police took off his helmet and started hitting the Palestinian. He takes his helmet off, grabs it with both hands … boom!" he recalled.

Lavie said that another police officer kicked a prisoner in the testicles.

"He stands him up against a wall and kicks him in the balls again," he said. "They're blindfolded and handcuffed, and they're screaming. Terrible screams. That still haunts me."

Physical abuse was not limited to adults. A parade of soldiers in one of the videos give accounts of violence against children. One soldier describes his commander pushing the barrel of his M-16 into the mouth of an eight year-old boy who had been throwing stones at their patrol.

Some of the most disturbing testimony comes from Lt David Zonsheine, who served in a reconnaissance unit operating in the West Bank. He described the arrest of a 14 year-old boy suspected of hiding a weapon or of



Gil Hillel. Photograph: Breaking the Silence

knowing where it was.

"What took place there was shocking torture including things like finding a thick wooden board in a field, sitting him on it and smashing his balls for several minutes. And then telling him, 'Look, we like you,' and kicking his balls. And then telling him, 'Come on, just tell us, get it over with, tell us where it is and we'll finish this,'" he said.

Zonsheine said one of the soldiers smashed a rock onto the boy's hand. Another kept knocking his head to one side. "And at some point they started with the punching. Fists and all that. He started convulsing," he said.

Zonsheine described the boy's interrogators as "quite fine with the whole thing". The soldier went looking for the boy the next day. He found him in hospital. "We saw him. He was in a plaster cast, a body cast. I don't really know what happened to him. I don't think he survived," said Zonsheine.

Breaking the Silence showed the videos to politicians in Washington, alongside a public exhibition there.

"We believe that part of the solution to the occupation is making everyone aware of what what is happening through the point of view of the soldiers who served," said Givati. "One of the things we're telling US policymakers is that, differently than what Israel is trying to tell them, doing nothing about the occupation is not good for Israel."

Breaking the Silence video testimonies exhibition is at ResoBox, 91 East 3rd St, until 15 December and will be shown again in 2023

Dismantling Sellafield: the epic task of shutting down a nuclear site

Samanth Subramanian

If you take the cosmic view of Sellafield, the superannuated nuclear facility in north-west England, its story began long before the Earth took shape. About 9bn years ago, tens of thousands of giant stars ran out of fuel, collapsed upon themselves, and then exploded. The sheer force of these supernova detonations mashed together the matter in the stars' cores, turning lighter elements like iron into heavier ones like uranium. Flung out by such explosions, trillions of tonnes of uranium traversed the cold universe and wound up near our slowly materialising solar system.

And here, over roughly 20m years, the uranium and other bits of space dust and debris cohered to form our planet in such a way that the violent tectonics of the young Earth pushed the uranium not towards its hot core but up into the folds of its crust. Within reach, so to speak, of the humans who eventually came

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along circa 300,000BC, and who mined the uranium beginning in the 1500s, learned about its radioactivity in 1896 and started feeding it into their nuclear reactors 70-odd years ago, making electricity that could be relayed to their houses to run toasters and light up Christmas trees.

Sellafield compels this kind of gaze into the abyss of deep time because it is a place where multiple time spans – some fleeting, some cosmic – drift in and out of view. Laid out over six square kilometres, Sellafield is like a small town, with nearly a thousand buildings, its own roads and even a rail siding – all owned by the government, and requiring security clearance to visit. Sellafield's presence, at the end of a road on the Cumbrian coast, is almost hallucinatory. One moment you're passing cows drowsing in pastures, with the sea winking just beyond. Then, having driven through a high-security gate, you're surrounded by towering chimneys, pipework, chugging cooling plants, everything dressed in steampunk. The sun bounces off metal everywhere. In some spots, the air shakes with the noise of machinery. It feels like the most manmade place in the world.

Since it began operating in 1950, Sellafield has had different duties. First it manufactured plutonium for nuclear weapons. Then it generated electricity for the National Grid, until 2003. It also carried out years of fuel reprocessing: extracting uranium and plutonium from nuclear fuel rods after they'd ended their life cycles. The very day before I visited Sellafield, in mid-July, the reprocessing came to an end as well. It was a historic occasion. From an operational nuclear facility, Sellafield turned into a full-time storage depot – but an uncanny, precarious one, filled with toxic nuclear waste that has to be kept contained at any cost.

Nothing is produced at Sellafield any more. Which was just as well, because I'd gone to Sellafield not to observe how it lived but to understand how it is preparing for its end. Sellafield's waste – spent fuel rods, scraps of metal, radioactive liquids, a miscellany of other debris – is parked in concrete silos, artificial ponds and sealed buildings. Some of these structures are growing, in the industry's parlance, "intolerable", atrophied by the sea air, radiation and time itself. If they degrade too much, waste will seep out of them, poisoning the Cumbrian soil and water.

To prevent that disaster, the waste must be hauled out, the silos destroyed and the ponds filled in with soil and paved over. The salvaged waste will then be transferred to more secure buildings that will be erected on site. But even that will be only a provisional arrangement, lasting a few decades. Nuclear waste has no respect for human timespans. The best way to neutralise its threat is to move it into a subterranean vault, of the kind the UK plans to build later this century. Once interred, the waste will be left alone for tens of thousands of years, while its radioactivity cools. Dealing with all the radioactive waste left on site is a slow-motion race against time, which will last so long that even the grandchildren of those working on site will not see its end. The process will cost at least £121bn.

Compared to the longevity of nuclear waste, Sellafield has only been around for roughly the span of a single lunch break within a human life. Still, it has lasted almost the entirety of the atomic age, witnessing both its earliest follies and its continuing confusions. In 1954, Lewis Strauss, the chair of the US Atomic Energy Commission, predicted that nuclear energy would make electricity "too cheap to meter". That forecast has aged poorly. The main reason power companies and governments aren't keener on nuclear power is not that activists are holding them back or that uranium is difficult to find, but that producing it safely is just proving too expensive.

Strauss was, like many others, held captive by one measure of time and unable to truly fathom another. The short-termism of policymaking neglected any plans that had to be made for the abominably lengthy, costly life of radioactive waste. I kept being told, at Sellafield, that science is still trying to rectify the decisions made in undue haste three-quarters of a century ago. Many of the earliest structures here, said Dan Bowman, the head of operations at one of Sellafield's two waste storage ponds, "weren't even built with decommissioning in mind".

As a result, Bowman admitted, Sellafield's scientists are having to invent, mid-marathon, the process of winding the site down – and they're finding that they still don't know enough about it. They don't know exactly what they'll find in the silos and ponds. They don't know how much time they'll need to mop up all the waste, or how long they'll have to store it, or what Sellafield will look like afterwards. The decommissioning programme is laden "with assumptions and best guesses", Bowman told me. It will be finished a century or so from now. Until then, Bowman and others will bend their ingenuity to a seemingly self-contradictory exercise: dismantling Sellafield while keeping it from falling apart along the way.

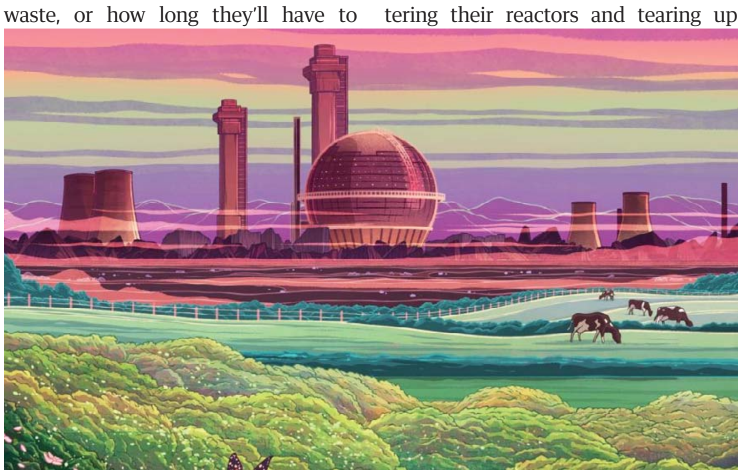
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To take apart an ageing nuclear facility, you have to put a lot of other things together first. New technologies, for instance, and new buildings to replace the intolerable ones, and new reserves of money. (That £121bn price tag may swell further.) All of Sellafield is in a holding pattern, trying to keep waste safe until it can be consigned to the ultimate strongroom: the geological disposal facility (GDF), bored hundreds of metres into the Earth's rock, a project that could cost another £53bn. Even if a GDF receives its first deposit in the 2040s, the waste has to be delivered and put away with such exacting caution that it can be filled and closed only by the middle of the 22nd century.

Anywhere else, this state of temporariness might induce a mood of lax detachment, like a transit lounge to a frequent flyer. But at Sellafield, with all its caches of radioactivity, the thought of catastrophe is so ever-present that you feel your surroundings with a heightened keenness. At one point, when we were walking through the site, a member of the Sellafield team pointed out three different waste storage facilities within a 500-metre radius. The spot where we stood on the road, he said, "is probably the most hazardous place in Europe".

Sellafield's waste comes in different forms and potencies. Spent fuel rods and radioactive pieces of metal rest in skips, which in turn are submerged in open, rectangular ponds, where water cools them and absorbs their radiation. The skips have held radioactive material for so long that they themselves count as waste. The pond beds are layered with nuclear sludge: degraded metal wisps, radioactive dust and debris. Discarded cladding, peeled off fuel rods like banana-skins, fills a cluster of 16-metre-deep concrete silos partially sunk into the earth. More dangerous still are the 20 tonnes of melted fuel inside a reactor that caught fire in 1957 and has been sealed off and left alone ever since. Somewhere on the premises, Sellafield has also stored the 140 tonnes of plutonium it has purified over the decades. It's the largest such hoard of plutonium in the world, but it, too, is a kind of waste, simply because nobody wants it for weapons any more, or knows what else to do with it.

It has been a dithery decade for nuclear policy. After the 2011 disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan, several countries began shuttering their reactors and tearing up plans for new ones. They'd become inordinately expensive to build and maintain, in any case, especially compared to solar and wind installations. In the UK, the fraction of electricity generated by nuclear plants has slid steadily downwards, from 25% in the 1990s to 16% in 2020. Of the five nuclear stations still producing power, only one will run beyond 2028. Hinkley Point C, the first new nuclear plant in a generation, is being built in Somerset, but its cost has bloated to more than £25bn.



▲ *Illustration: Jason Lyon/The Guardian*

This year, though, governments felt the pressure to redo their sums when sanctions on Russia abruptly choked off supplies of oil and gas. Wealthy nations suddenly found themselves worrying about winter blackouts. In this crisis, governments are returning to the habit they were trying to break. Germany had planned to abandon nuclear fuel by the end of this year, but in October, it extended that deadline to next spring. The US allocated $6bn to save struggling plants; the UK pressed ahead with plans for Sizewell C, a nuclear power station to be built in Suffolk. Japan, its Fukushima trauma just a decade old, announced that it will commission new plants. Even as Sellafield is cleaning up after the first round of nuclear enthusiasm, another is getting under way.

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Any time spent in Sellafield is scored to a soundtrack of alarms and signals. The radiation trackers clipped to our protective overalls let off soft cheeps, their frequency varying as radioactivity levels changed around us. Before leaving every building, we ran Geiger counters over ourselves – always remembering to scan the tops of our heads and the soles of our feet – and these clacked like rattlesnakes. At one spot, our trackers went mad. A pipe on the outside of a building had cracked, and staff had planted 10ft-tall sheets of lead into the ground around it to shield people from the radiation. It was perfectly safe, my guide assured me. We power-walked past nonetheless.

The day I visited Sellafield was the UK's hottest ever. We sweltered even before we put on heavy boots and overalls to visit the reprocessing plant, where, until the previous day, technicians had culled uranium and plutonium out of spent fuel. Every second, on each of the plant's four floors, I heard a beep – a regular pulse, reminding everyone that nothing is amiss. "We've got folks here who joined at 18 and have been here more than 40 years, working only in this building," said Lisa Dixon, an operations manager. Dixon's father had been a welder here, and her husband is one of the firefighters stationed permanently on site. She meets aunts and cousins on her shifts all the time. When she says Sellafield is one big family, she isn't just being metaphorical.

I only ever saw a dummy of a spent fuel rod; the real thing would have been a metre long, weighed 10-12kg, and, when it emerged from a reactor, run to temperatures of 2,800C, half as hot as the surface of the sun. In a reactor, hundreds of rods of fresh uranium fuel slide into a pile of graphite blocks. Then a stream of neutrons, usually emitted by an even more radioactive metal such as californium, is directed into the pile. Those neutrons generate more neutrons out of uranium atoms, which generate still more neutrons out of other uranium atoms, and so on, the whole process begetting vast quantities of heat that can turn water into steam and drive turbines.

During this process, some of the uranium atoms, randomly but very usefully, absorb darting neutrons, yielding heavier atoms of plutonium: the stuff of nuclear weapons. The UK's earliest reactors – a type called Magnox – were set up to harvest plutonium for bombs; the electricity was a happy byproduct. The government built 26 such reactors across the country. They're all being decommissioned now, or awaiting demolition. It turned out that if you weren't looking to make plutonium nukes to blow up cities, Magnox was a pretty inefficient way to light up homes and power factories.

For most of the latter half of the 20th century, one of Sellafield's chief tasks was reprocessing. Once uranium and plutonium were extracted from used fuel rods, it was thought, they could be stored safely – and perhaps eventually resold, to make money on the side. Beginning in 1956, spent rods came to Cumbria from plants across the UK, but also by sea from customers in Italy and Japan. Sellafield has taken in nearly 60,000 tonnes of spent fuel, more than half of all such fuel reprocessed anywhere in the world. The rods arrived at Sellafield by train, stored in cuboid "flasks" with corrugated sides, each weighing about 50 tonnes and standing 1.5 metres tall. The flasks were cast from single ingots of stainless steel, their walls a third of a metre thick. Responding to worries about how robust these containers were, the government, in 1984, arranged to have a speeding train collide head-on with a flask. The video is spectacular. At 100mph, a part of the locomotive exploded and the train derailed. But the flask, a few scratches and dents aside, stayed intact.

At Sellafield, the rods were first cooled in ponds of water for between 90 and 250 days. Then they were skinned of their cladding and dissolved in boiling nitric acid. From that liquor, technicians separated out uranium and plutonium, powdery like cumin. This cycle, from acid to powder, lasted up to 36 hours, Dixon said – and it hadn't improved a jot in efficiency in the years she'd been there. The only change was the dwindling number of rods coming in, as Magnox reactors closed everywhere.

The day before I met Dixon, technicians had fed one final batch of spent fuel into acid – and that was that, the end of reprocessing. It marked Sellafield's transition from an operational facility to a depot devoted purely to storage and containment. The rods went in late in the evening, after hours of technical hitches, so the moment itself was anticlimactic. "They just dropped through, and you heard nothing. So it was like: 'OK, that's it? Let's go home,'" Dixon said. But the following morning, when I met her, she felt sombre, she admitted. "Everybody's thinking: 'What do we do? There's no fuel coming in.' I don't think it's really hit the team just yet."



▲ *Flasks of nuclear waste in the vitrified product store at Sellafield in 2003. Yellow circles denote full flasks, black are empty. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/*

The reprocessing plant's end was always coming. The pipes and steam lines, many from the 1960s, kept fracturing. Dixon's team was running out of spare parts that aren't manufactured any more. "Since December 2019," Dixon said, "I've only had 16 straight days of running the plant at any one time." Best to close it down – to conduct repairs, clean the machines and take them apart. Then, at last, the reprocessing plant will be placed on "fire watch", visited periodically to ensure nothing in the building is going up in flames, but otherwise left alone for decades for its radioactivity to dwindle, particle by particle.

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Like malign glitter, radioactivity gets everywhere, turning much of what it touches into nuclear waste. The humblest items – a paper towel or a shoe cover used for just a second in a nuclear environment – can absorb radioactivity, but this stuff is graded as low-level waste; it can be encased in a block of cement and left outdoors. (Cement is an excellent shield against radiation. A popular phrase in the nuclear waste industry goes: "When in doubt, grout.") Even the paper towel needs a couple of hundred years to shed its radioactivity and become safe, though. A moment of use, centuries of quarantine: radiation tends to twist time all out of proportion.

On the other hand, high-level waste – the byproduct of reprocessing – is so radioactive that its containers will

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give off heat for thousands of years. It, too, will become harmless over time, but the scale of that time is planetary, not human. The number of radioactive atoms in the kind of iodine found in nuclear waste byproducts halves every 16m years. In comparison, consider how different the world looked a mere 7,000 years ago, when a determined pedestrian could set out from the Humber estuary, in northern England, and walk across to the Netherlands and then to Norway. Planning for the disposal of high-level waste has to take into account the drift of continents and the next ice age.

All radioactivity is a search for stability. Most of the atoms in our daily lives – the carbon in the wood of a desk, the oxygen in the air, the silicon in window glass – have stable nuclei. But in the atoms of some elements like uranium or plutonium, protons and neutrons are crammed into their nuclei in ways that make them unsteady – make them radioactive. These atoms decay, throwing off particles and energy over years or millennia until they become lighter and more stable. Nuclear fuel is radioactive, of course, but so is nuclear waste, and the only thing that can render such waste harmless is time.

Waste can travel incognito, to fatal effect: radioactive atoms carried by the wind or water, entering living bodies, riddling them with cancer, ruining them inside out. During the 1957 reactor fire at Sellafield, a radioactive plume of particles poured from the top of a 400-foot chimney. A few days later, some of these particles were detected as far away as Germany and Norway. Near Sellafield, radioactive iodine found its way into the grass of the meadows where dairy cows grazed, so that samples of milk taken in the weeks after the fire showed 10 times the permissible level. The government had to buy up milk from farmers living in 500 sq km around Sellafield and dump it in the Irish Sea.

From the outset, authorities hedged and fibbed. For three days, no one living in the area was told about the gravity of the accident, or even advised to stay indoors and shut their windows. Workers at Sellafield, reporting their alarming radiation exposure to their managers, were persuaded that they'd "walk [it] off on the way home", the Daily Mirror reported at the time. A government inquiry was then held, but its report was not released in full until 1988. For nearly 30 years, few people knew that the fire dispersed not just radioactive iodine but also polonium, far more deadly. The estimated toll of cancer deaths has been revised upwards continuously, from 33 to 200 to 240. Sellafield took its present name only in 1981, in part to erase the old name, Windscale, and the associated memories of the fire.

The invisibility of radiation and the opacity of governments make for a bad combination. Sellafield hasn't suffered an accident of equivalent scale since the 1957 fire, but the niggling fear that some radioactivity is leaking out of the facility in some fashion has never entirely vanished. In 1983, a Sellafield pipeline discharged half a tonne of radioactive solvent into the sea. British Nuclear Fuels Limited, the government firm then running Sellafield, was fined £10,000. Around the same time, a documentary crew found higher incidences than expected of leukaemia among children in some surrounding areas. A government study concluded that radiation from Sellafield wasn't to blame. Perhaps, the study suggested, the leukaemia had an undetected, infectious cause.

It was no secret that Sellafield kept on site huge stashes of spent fuel rods, waiting to be reprocessed. This was lucrative work. An older reprocessing plant on site earned £9bn over its lifetime, half of it from customers overseas. But the pursuit of commercial reprocessing turned Sellafield and a similar French site into "de facto waste dumps", the journalist Stephanie Cooke found in her book In Mortal Hands. Sellafield now requires £2bn *a year* to maintain. What looked like a smart line of business back in the 1950s has now turned out to be anything but. With every passing year, maintaining the world's costliest rubbish dump becomes more and more commercially calamitous.

The expenditure rises because structures age, growing more rickety, more prone to mishap. In 2005, in an older reprocessing plant at Sellafield, 83,000 litres of radioactive acid – enough to fill a few hundred bathtubs – dripped out of a ruptured pipe. The plant had to be shut down for two years; the cleanup cost at least £300m. The year before the pandemic, a sump tank attached to a waste pond sprang a leak and had to be grouted shut. Around the same time, an old crack in a waste silo opened up again. It posed no health risk, Sellafield determined, so it was still dripping liquid into the ground when I visited. The silos are rudimentary concrete bins, built for waste to be tipped in, but for no other kind of access. Their further degradation is a sure thing. It all put me in mind of a man who'd made a house of ice in deepest winter but now senses spring around the corner, and must move his furniture out before it all melts and collapses around him.

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Some industrial machines have soothing names; the laser snake is not one of them. After its fat, six-metre-long body slinks out of its cage-like housing, it can rear up in serpentine fashion, as if scanning its surroundings for prey. Its anatomy is made up of accordion folds, so it can stretch and compress on command. The snake's face is the size and shape of a small dinner plate, with a mouth through which it fires a fierce, purple shaft of light. The laser can slice through inches-thick steel, sparks flaring from the spot where the beam blisters the metal. It took two years and £5m to develop this instrument. If Philip K Dick designed your nightmares, the laser snake would haunt them.

Six years ago, the snake's creators put it to work in a demo at Sellafield. A 10-storey building called B204 had been Sellafield's first reprocessing facility, but in 1973, a rogue chemical reaction filled the premises with radioactive gas. Thirty-four workers were contaminated, and the building was promptly closed down. Gas, fuel rods and radioactive equipment were all left in place, in sealed rooms known as cells, which turned so lethal that humans haven't entered them since. The snake, though, could slither right in – through a hole drilled into a cell wall, and right up to a two-metre-high, double-walled steel vat once used to dissolve fuel in acid. Like so much else in B204, the vat was radioactive waste. It had to be disposed of, but it was too big to remove in one piece.

For six weeks, Sellafield's engineers prepared for the task, rehearsing on a 3D model, ventilating the cell, setting up a stream of air to blow away the molten metal, ensuring that nothing caught fire from the laser's sparks. Once in action, the snake took mere minutes to cut up the vat. But then the pieces were left in the cell. No one had figured out yet how to remove them. The snake hasn't been deployed since 2015, because other, more urgent tasks lie at hand.

As a project, tackling Sellafield's nuclear waste is a curious mix of sophistication and what one employee called the "poky stick" approach. On the one hand, it calls for ingenious machines like the laser snake, conceived especially for Sellafield. But the years-long process of scooping waste out can also feel crude and time-consuming – "like emptying a wheelie bin with a teaspoon", Phil Atherton, a manager working with the silo team, told me. New forms of storage have to be devised for the waste, once it's removed. These have to be secure and robust – but they can't be irretrievably secure and robust, because scientists may yet develop better ways to deal with waste. "You don't want to do anything that forecloses any prospective solutions," Atherton said. No possible version of the future can be discounted.

We walked on the roof of the silos, atop their heavy concrete caps. Below us, submerged in water, lay decades' worth of intermediate-level waste – not quite as radioactive as spent fuel rods, but more harmful than low-level paper towels. Most of it was swarf – the cladding skinned off fuel rods, broken into chunks three or four inches long. What Atherton really wanted to show off, though, was a new waste retrieval system: a machine as big as a studio apartment, designed from scratch over two decades and built at a cost of £100m. Its 13,500 working parts together weigh 350 tonnes. It perched on rails running the length of the building, so that it could be moved and positioned above an uncapped silo.

An operator sits inside the machine, reaching long, mechanical arms into the silo to fish out waste. In the water's gloom, cameras offer little help, he said: "You're mostly playing by feel." In the two preceding months, the team had pulled out enough waste to fill four skips. Eventually there will be two more retrieval machines in the silos, their arms poking and clasping like the megafauna cousins of those fairground soft-toy grabbers. Even so, it will take until 2050 to empty all the silos. The skips of extricated waste will be compacted to a third of their volume, grouted and moved into another Sellafield warehouse; at some point, they will be sequestered in the ground, in the GDF that is, at present, hypothetical.

Not far from the silos, I met John Cassidy, who has helped manage one of Sellafield's waste storage ponds for more than three decades – so long that a colleague called him "the Oracle". Cassidy's pond, which holds 14,000 cubic metres of water, resembles an extra-giant, extra-filthy lido planted in the middle of an industrial park. In the water, the skips full of used fuel rods were sometimes stacked three deep, and when one was placed in or pulled out, rods tended to tumble out on to the floor of the pond.

We climbed a staircase in a building constructed over a small part of the pond. On one floor, we stopped to look at a remotely operated vehicle, or ROV – a steamer trunk-sized thing with a yellow carapace, floating in the algal-green water. "You see the little arm at the end of it?" Cassidy said. "So it'll float down to the bottom of the pond, pick up a nuclear rod that has fallen out of a skip, and put it back into the skip." Sometimes, though, a human touch is required. This winter, Sellafield will hire professional divers from the US. Nuclear plants keep so much water on hand – to cool fuel, moderate the reactor's heat, or generate steam – that a class of specialist divers works only in the ponds and tanks at these plants, inspecting and repairing them. In Sellafield, these nuclear divers will put on radiation-proof wetsuits and tidy up the pond floor, reaching the places where robotic arms cannot go.

Two floors above, a young Sellafield employee sat in a gaming chair, working at a laptop with a joystick. He was manoeuvring an ROV fitted with a toilet brush – "a regular brush, bought at the store," he said, "just kind of reinforced with a bit of plastic tube". With a delicacy not ordinarily required of it, the toilet brush wiped debris and algae off a skip until the digits "9738", painted in black, appeared on the skip's flank. When they arrived over the years, during the heyday of reprocessing, the skips were unloaded into pools so haphazardly that Sellafield is now having to build an underwater map of what is where, just to know best how to get it all out. Skip No 9738 went into the map, one more hard-won addition to Sellafield's knowledge of itself.

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"Waste disposal is a completely solved problem," Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb, declared in 1979. He was right, but only in theory. The nuclear industry certainly knew about the utility of water, steel and concrete as shields against radioactivity, and by the 1970s, the US government had begun considering burying reactor waste in a GDF. But Teller was glossing over the details, namely: the expense of keeping waste safe, the duration over which it has to be maintained, the accidents that could befall it, the fallout of those accidents. Four decades on, not a single GDF has begun to operate anywhere in the world. Teller's complete solution is still a hypothesis.

Instead, there have been only interim solutions, although to a layperson, even these seem to have been conceived in some scientist's intricate delirium. High-level waste, like the syrupy liquor formed during reprocessing, has to be cooled first, in giant tanks. Then it is vitrified: mixed with three parts glass beads and a little sugar, until it turns into a hot block of dirty-brown glass. (The sugar reduces the waste's volatility. "We like to get ours from Tate & Lyle," Eva Watson-Graham, a Sellafield information officer, said.) Since 1991, stainless steel containers full of vitrified waste, each as tall as a human, have been stacked 10-high in a warehouse. If you stand on the floor above them, Watson-Graham said, you can still sense a murmuring warmth on the soles of your shoes.

Even this elaborate vitrification is insufficient in the long, long, long run. Fire or flood could destroy Sellafield's infrastructure. Terrorists could try to get at the nuclear material. Governments change, companies fold, money runs out. Nations dissolve. Glass degrades. The ground sinks and rises, so that land becomes sea and sea becomes land. The contingency planning that scientists do today – the kind that wasn't done when the industry was in its infancy – contends with yawning stretches of time. Hence the GDF: a terrestrial cavity to hold waste until its dangers have dried up and it becomes as benign as the surrounding rock.

A glimpse of such an endeavour is available already, beneath Finland. From Helsinki, if you drive 250km west, then head another half-km down, you will come to a warren of tunnels called Onkalo. Other underground vaults have been built to store intermediate waste, but for briefer periods; one that opened in a salt cavern in New Mexico in 1999 will last merely 10,000 years. If Onkalo begins operating on schedule, in 2025, it will be the world's first GDF for spent fuel and high-level reactor waste – 6,500 tonnes of the stuff, all from Finnish nuclear stations. It will cost €5.5bn and is designed to be safe for a million years. The species that is building it, Homo sapiens, has only been around for a third of that time.

Constructed by a firm named Posiva, Onkalo has been hewn into the island of Olkiluoto, a brief bridge's length off Finland's south-west coast. When I visited in October, the birches on Olkiluoto had turned to a hot blush. The air was pure Baltic brine. In a van, we went down a steep, dark ramp for a quarter of an hour until we reached Onkalo's lowest level, and here I caught the acrid odour of a closed space in which heavy machinery has run for a long time. Up close, the walls were pimpled and jagged, like stucco, but at a distance, the rock's surface undulated like soft butter. Twice, we followed a feebly lit tunnel only to turn around and drive back up. "I still get lost sometimes here," said Sanna Mustonen, a geologist with Posiva, "even after all these years." After Onkalo takes in all its waste, these caverns will be sealed up to the surface with bentonite, a kind of clay that absorbs water, and that is often found in cat litter.

It took four decades just to decide the location of Finland's GDF. So much had to be considered, Mustonen said. How easy would it be to drill and blast through the 1.9bn-year-old bedrock below the site? How dry is it below ground? How stable will the waste be amidst the fracture zones in these rocks? What are the odds of tsunamis and earthquakes? How high will the sea rise? How will the rock bear up if, in the next ice age, tens of thousands of years from today, a kilometre or two of ice forms on the surface? Accidents had to be modelled. Fifteen years after the New Mexico site opened, a drum of waste burst open, leaking radiation up an exhaust shaft and then for a kilometre or so above ground. (The cause was human error: someone had added a wheat-based cat litter into the drum instead of bentonite.) In late 2021, Posiva submitted all its studies and contingency plans to the Finnish government to seek an operating license. The document ran to 17,000 pages.

In the 2120s, once it has been filled, Onkalo will be sealed and turned over to the state. Other countries also plan to banish their nuclear waste into GDFs. Sweden has already selected its spot, Switzerland and France are trying to finalise theirs. The UK's plans are at an earlier stage. A government agency, Nuclear Waste Services, is studying locations and talking to the people living there, but already the ballpark expenditure is staggering. "If the geology is simple, and we're disposing of just high- and intermediate-level waste, then we're thinking £20bn," said Jonathan Turner, a geologist with Nuclear Waste Services. The ceiling – for now – is £53bn. "It's a major project," Turner said,

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"like the Chunnel or the Olympics."

At the moment, Nuclear Waste Services is in discussions with four communities about the potential to host a GDF. Three are in Cumbria, and if the GDF does wind up in this neighbourhood, the Sellafield enterprise would have come full circle. The GDF will effectively entomb not just decades of nuclear waste but also the decades-old idea that atomic energy will be both easy and cheap – the very idea that drove the creation of Sellafield, where the world's earliest nuclear aspirations began.

On one of my afternoons in Sellafield, I was shown around a half-made building: a £1bn factory that would pack all the purified plutonium into canisters to be sent to a GDF. We ducked through half-constructed corridors and emerged into the main, as-yet-roofless hall. Eventually, the plant will be taller than Westminster Abbey – and as part of the decommissioning process, this structure too will be torn down once it has finished its task, decades from now. I stood there for a while, transfixed by the sight of a building going up even as its demolition was already foretold, feeling the water-filled coolness of the fresh, metre-thick concrete walls, and trying to imagine the distant, dreamy future in which all of Sellafield would be returned to fields and meadows again.

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Bank of England raises interest rates to 3.5% in ninth increase in a year

Phillip Inman

Mortgage payers are braced for higher borrowing costs, after the Bank of England pushed up its base rate by 0.5 percentage points to 3.5% despite saying inflation has peaked and Britain is about to enter "a prolonged recession".

The Bank hiked interest rates on Thursday for the ninth time in a year, to the highest level in 14 years, but told borrowers to prepare for fresh increases in the new year.

Members of the Bank's monetary policy committee (MPC) voted to increase the cost of borrowing after the consumer prices index (CPI) in November showed annual inflation of 10.7%.

Governor Andrew Bailey said a fall in CPI from 11.1% in October represented "the first glimmer" that inflation had begun to ease and he expected a rapid fall, "probably from the late spring onwards".

His comments, which appeared to show further rate rises could peak below forecasts of 4.5% by the end of next year, sent the pound tumbling against the dollar by 2 cents.

Bailey forecast skill shortages would push wages higher and prevent inflation falling towards the Bank's 2% target as fast as he hoped.

"There is a risk that [inflation won't fall] in that way, particularly because the labour market and the labour supply in this country is so tight.

"And that's why, really, we had to raise interest rates today, because we see that risk as really quite pronounced."

Debt charity StepChange said higher borrowing costs would plunge more people into debt and called on lenders to show restraint before calling in loans.

Its chief executive Phil Andrew said households with the least financial resilience faced a double whammy of rising inflation and higher credit costs.

"It looks as if housing debt will be a particular pressure facing millions of households in 2023," he said.

Shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves said the rate rise was made in Downing Street, "leaving millions of working people paying a Tory mortgage penalty for years to come".

Financial markets expected the rise, which was heavily trailed by Bailey, and the chief economist, Huw Pill, after they said "more needed to be done" to bring down inflation, before adding that a repeat of November's 0.75 percentage point rise was unlikely.

In a three-way split vote, when two members of the nine-strong MPC voted to keep the base rate on hold and another member pushed for a more aggressive rise, the MPC said there were "considerable uncertainties around the outlook".

While global supply chain blockages have eased, bringing down the price of many commodities and goods since they rose sharply earlier this year, cost pressures have remained throughout global markets.

With cold winter weather biting much of Europe, the path of gas prices and the cost of food could rise, keeping inflation higher for longer.

The US Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank have signalled that they will ease back on rate rises in 2023 following forecasts that there is a strong prospect of a recession and job losses across the industrialised world.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to disrupt the supply of gas and some foodstuffs, adding to inflationary pressures.

The Bank's report said there were several indicators showing the economy had weakened since the summer. It expects a 0.1% contraction in GDP in the last quarter of 2022, which would put the UK economy officially in recession after a 0.2% contraction in the third quarter. The downturn is expected to last well into 2023, though it will be milder than expected in the Bank's forecasts last month.

Giving a strong indication that the housing market has already weakened, the number of home purchases has fallen to below 60,000 a month, the lowest since 2013.

Bailey voted with the majority of MPC members for a 0.5 percentage point rise. Two members of the MPC, the LSE professors Swati Dhingra and Silvana Tenreyro, said the cost of living crisis facing millions of households and previous interest rate rises meant the economy would slow without further rate rises.

Elon Musk sells new $3.6bn tranche of Tesla shares

Dan Milmo

Elon Musk has sold a further $3.6bn (£2.9bn) worth of shares in Tesla, in the same week that he lost the title of world's richest man to France's Bernard Arnault.

The disposal, revealed in a regulatory filing, takes the total amount raised by Musk from sales of his stock in the electric carmaker this year to more than $20bn.

The Tesla CEO has been raising funds to pay for his $44bn acquisition of Twitter, although the filing did not give a purpose for the sale of 22m shares between Monday and Wednesday this week.

Forbes and Bloomberg, which monitor the wealth of billionaires, reported this week that Musk was no longer the world's richest man, having been overtaken by Arnault, the chief executive of luxury group LVMH. According to Bloomberg, Musk is worth $161bn and Arnault, who presides over brands including Louis Vuitton and Dom Pérignon, is worth $172bn.



▲ *Elon Musk has sold $23bn worth of Tesla shares so far this year, in part to finance his takeover of Twitter. Photograph: Reuters*

Musk's wealth briefly slipped below Arnault's last week before he reclaimed top spot, only to lose it again this week. The bulk of Musk's wealth is largely represented by stock in Tesla, in which he has a shareholding of more than 13%, according to data provider Refinitiv.

Tesla's stock price has halved this year, underperforming automakers and the broader tech-heavy Nasdaq, which is down about 30% this year.

Including this week's sale, so far this year Musk has sold 94.2m shares in Tesla at an average price of $243 a share, generating pre-tax proceeds of just under $23bn, according to VerityData.

Musk put in more than $20bn of his own money to buy Twitter in October, alongside $7.1bn from associates and about $4bn from his existing stake in the social media platform.

However, he also controls other valuable businesses, including his rocket company SpaceX, which is reportedly in talks about a share offering that could value it at up to $150bn.

Alongside Twitter, Tesla and SpaceX, Musk's other business concerns include the tunnelling firm the Boring Company and Neuralink, a startup developing interfaces to connect the human brain to computers.

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Pint of order: New York judge asks jury to define 'beer' in Corona case

Maya Yang

A federal judge wants a New York jury to determine the definition of beer.

Lewis Kaplan of the southern district of New York was considering a request from Modelo to hold liable Constellation Brands, the US distributor of the Mexican brewer's popular Corona beer, for selling Corona-branded hard seltzer without permission.

On Tuesday, Kaplan ruled that Modelo was not entitled to an immediate pre-trial win. But the judge had also denied Constellation's attempt to end the case, setting up a jury trial that could turn on how the companies defined the word "beer" in their trademark licensing agreement.

Modelo filed suit last year, arguing Constellation's Corona Hard Seltzer breached a licensing agreement and infringed trademarks because the agreement only allowed Constellation to sell beer under the Corona name.

Constellation said the definition of "beer" in the agreement also covered hard seltzer.



▲ *Modelo filed suit last year, arguing that the distributor is only allowed to sell beer under the Corona name. Photograph: Andrew Winning/Reuters*

Modelo said no reasonable jury could read the definition that way.

In his ruling, Kaplan said: "It bears mention that the question whether the [Constellation] hard seltzers fall within the sublicense – ie, whether they constitute 'beer' within the meaning of that agreement – came before the court on [Constellation's] motion to dismiss the original complaint.

"The court denied that motion … essentially on the ground that the word 'beer' and other relevant provisions of the sublicense were ambiguous."

Kaplan said that though Modelo's argument might be stronger, the definition of "beer" in the agreement was still too ambiguous to determine before trial.

"Modelo has more dictionaries on its side of this debate over the meaning of 'beer' than does" Constellation, Kaplan said. "But the fact remains that dictionaries, however important, do not resolve this case.

"The meaning of the sublicense as it relates to [Constellation] hard seltzer products is ambiguous … and while Modelo perhaps has the better of the argument, the court is not now in a position to conclude that no reasonable jury could find for" Constellation.

No trial date was set.

Last August, Modelo separately alleged that Constellation's tequila- and bourbon-barrel aged Modelo Reserva beers also violate the license agreement. That case is currently in mediation.

Reuters contributed reporting

Crypto was meant to solve financial corruption. The FTX scandal shows it's got worse

David A Banks

On 11 November 2022 FTX declared bankruptcy. The firm was once heralded as the Goldman Sachs of crypto, and its CEO, Sam Bankman-Fried, was deemed by some the next Warren Buffett. And now, just after proclaiming in an interview that he would not be arrested, he is in custody in the Bahamas awaiting extradition to the US. He is charged with a litany of fraud and campaign finance law violations, in what US prosecutors are calling "one of the biggest financial frauds in American history".

Casual investors, along with funders ranging from the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan to BlackRock, who invested millions into FTX, are now uncertain where their money went and if they will ever get it back. Amid a long series of scandals and collapses, this seems to be the one that has undermined trust of and within the cryptocurrency sector. This is far from over and if you want to keep up on it, researcher Molly White has made an excellent chart where you can watch the contagion spread.

Blockchain-based technologies were supposed to make finance an automated, frictionless environment where fallible humans and their corruptible institutions could be replaced by the infallible logic of code. Cryptocurrencies would finally give the little guy a chance by forcing everyone



▲ *FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried, centre, is escorted out of court, following his arrest in Nassau, Bahamas, 13 December 2022. Photograph: Austin Fernander/AP*

to play by the same encoded rules. But instead, these technologies appear to have supercharged the same old problems, letting a Bahamas-based "polycule" commit international fraud to the order of billions of dollars and sink millions into political candidates in just three years.

The way this was intended to work was to replace interpersonal relationships and institutional reputation with new "trustless" systems. According to the Binance Academy glossary, traditional banks run by humans would be replaced by blockchain-based networks that, "by providing economic incentives for honest behaviour" would "maintain network security". In this new world of decentralised finance, DeFi for short, those incentives would be directly coded into decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs), where the purchase and trading of proprietary tokens – units of crypto – would automatically trigger contracts and other actions based on pre-written rules.

Take, for example, PleasrDAO, which was set up to buy and sell non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Members of the DAO pool their money by buying "The People's Coin" and using the exchange of those coins to make decisions. So if there was a proposal on the network to buy an asset, say, Pussy Riot's "Virgin Mary, Please Become a Feminist" NFT, members could trade coins based on pre-determined and hard-coded rules that indicated their preference to buy it and where to display it. No one user makes the final decision, and all decisions and votes are recorded on the DAO's blockchain. According to proponents, traditional hierarchies of humanity would be flattened into an infinite horizon of objective, computer-mediated exchange.

Well, that didn't happen. John Ray III, the new chief executive once FTX went into receivership, has not minced words: "Never in my career have I seen such a complete failure of corporate controls and such a complete absence of trustworthy financial information as occurred here." Ray, who performed the same job in the wake of the Enron scandal more than two decades ago, called the situation "unprecedented" and laid all the blame at the feet of Bankman-Fried and his "very small group of inexperienced, unsophisticated and potentially compromised individuals".

Like any radical, a true believer in crypto could argue that FTX is what happens when the revolutionary DeFi program is not fully implemented. But here again crypto bros are hoisted by their own trustless petard. The reality is that the 21st-century crypto industry – automated or not – must follow the same capitalist market physics that were endemic to 20th-century energy markets, or 19th-century London banks: ruthless competition winnows an industry down to a few key players and then, as Marx wrote in 1847,

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there comes a phase "when everybody is seized with a sort of craze for making profit without producing".

And so it should come as no surprise that, as the New York Times put it, the crypto industry quickly "started assuming some of the same characteristics as the Wall Street institutions that it was designed to replace", with the majority of trading happening on just a few exchanges – including FTX and Binance. Sure, you could write a bit of code that says at some point the organisation must cleave into multiple competing ones, thus staving off centralisation, but it only takes one actor to decide not to play by those rules to dominate the market. The only thing preventing that from happening is, well, a central authority. Like a government. I have yet to see an argument for how DAOs, no matter how internally well-regulated they are (and so far they're not), can automate away this bad-actor problem that every Econ 101 student learns.

It should concern everyone in the UK that Rishi Sunak claimed last June, when he was still chancellor, that he wanted to make the country "the jurisdiction of choice for crypto and blockchain technology". Now that he's prime minister and the collective price of all cryptocurrencies have shed the equivalent of more than £400bn of value since that statement, he's been much quieter about his plans. Parliament is, in fact, considering empowering the Financial Conduct Authority to treat crypto like most other financial assets, which includes combatting false advertising, money laundering and mismanagement.

Indeed, the path to the stated goals of decentralised finance – accessible markets, protections from fraud, defences from theft – are very old goals that have been met through progressive taxation structures, unionised labour, antitrust law and other regulation. Unfortunately, for those who want to become billionaire celebrity crypto influencers, this set of tools will not make you rich. If the decentralised finance crowd was serious, this is the route they'd take. But they won't, because the populism of crypto was never anything more than marketing.

David A Banks is the director of globalisation studies at the University at Albany, SUNY and is the author of The City Authentic: How the Attention Economy Builds Urban America

Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead mansion sold for £3m despite tenants refusing to leave

Rupert Neate Wealth correspondent

The Grade II*-listed Cotswold mansion where Evelyn Waugh wrote Brideshead Revisited has sold at auction for £3.16m despite buyers being warned that sitting tenants – who are paying a weekly rent of £5 a week – are refusing to leave the property.

Piers Court, at Stinchcombe, a village about halfway between Bristol and Cheltenham, was sold to an unnamed bidder in an online auction on Thursday after the owner defaulted on a loan secured against the eight-bedroom, six-bathroom property.

The sale, which was first reported by the Guardian, went ahead despite the tenants, who described themselves as "Evelyn Waugh superfans", refusing to vacate the property which they rent for just £250 a year in a deal with its previous owner, Jason Blain. The former executive for BBC Worldwide and Sony Entertainment bought the property for £2.9m in 2019 through a company called Winston's House.

However, the company defaulted on a £2.1m loan from the historic London bank C Hoare & Co, which appointed receivers to sell the property at auction.



▲ *Piers Court in Gloucestershire, once owned by Evelyn Waugh. Photograph: Knight Frank*

Blain, who was earlier this year sued by the Mandarin Oriental hotel over the £1.24m cost of an eight-month overstay in the hotel's £4,725-a-night penthouse, appointed his friends Helen Lawton and Bechara Madi to the board of Winston's House and agreed the cut-price rent deal with them.

Prospective buyers were warned by the auctioneers that: "The property is occupied under a common law tenancy at a rent of £250 per annum. A notice to quit was served on the occupant on 19 August 2022 and a copy of such notice was affixed to the property gate on 22 August 2022. Prospective purchasers should take their own legal advice regarding this and will be deemed to bid accordingly."

Madi said this week: "It's our home, for the short term and for the long term. We will be putting our Christmas tree and decorations up in the next few days. We are going nowhere.

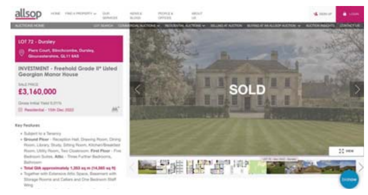
"We have spent a lot of our own money on the upkeep of the house, it's our home and we have no plans to move," he told MailOnline, adding that they had put a share of their money into the company that bought the house. "We are not tenants, we have a major share in the house and have put in hundreds of thousands of pounds of our own money."

Lawton claims to be friends with Waugh's family, and told the Evelyn Waugh Society that she was planning a party to bring together many of his relatives at the house.

Duncan McLaren, of the Evelyn Waugh Society, writing of a chance meeting with Lawton in 2019 while walking along a public footpath through the grounds of the house, said: "In recent weeks she has been very excited to learn about the Evelyn Waugh associations of her new home."

He said they had a conversation in which Lawton said she knew Septimus Waugh, the author's seventh child, and there was a plan to bring Septimus's former nanny, who was then in her 90s, from Northumberland to the house for a day. It is not known if the visit happened.

McLaren wrote: "Helen also knows



▲ *Piers Court auction page. Photograph: Allsop*

Alexander Waugh, Evelyn's grandson, and has other plans to bring Evelyn Waugh activities to the house."

Waugh bought the house for £3,600 in 1937 with money he had been given by the parents of his second wife, Laura Herbert. The couple lived in Piers Court for 19 years, apart from during the second world war when he rented the mansion to a convent school, and he wrote many of his best-known novels in its library, including Officers and Gentlemen, Men at Arms and Brideshead Revisited.

Waugh and Herbert hosted dinner parties with famous friends and intellectuals including Graham Greene, Nancy Mitford and John Betjeman. Waugh wrote in his diary that Piers Court was "the kind of house which takes a lot of living up to".

The Guardian view: please give generously to our 2022 charity appeal

Editorial

Thanks to the generosity of readers, we have already raised £350,000 in the week since our 2022 appeal was launched. This year, we are supporting two organisations that are experts at reaching deep within the communities they serve. Donations will provide urgently needed funds to frontline services that increasing numbers of people across the UK desperately need. Food, clothing and warm banks, and debt and housing advice, are all in demand as never before, as living standards fall faster and harder than in more than 60 years.

Our chosen charities, Locality and Citizens Advice, support families and individuals in difficulties in complementary ways. Locality is an umbrella organisation for grassroots and community groups. It will distribute your contributions as grants to some of the most economically deprived neighbourhoods in the UK (working with partners in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to make this a nationwide effort). As well as practical initiatives such as food banks, these smaller local charities focus on issues including loneliness and wellbeing, and run activities for vulnerable groups including older people and children and teenagers growing up in poverty.



▲ *'Citizens Advice centres are among the few remaining places where people in trouble can seek support face to face.' Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian*

Citizens Advice is experiencing unprecedented levels of need for the help it offers. This includes guidance to people struggling with debt, housing or benefits issues, and increasingly those in need of urgent assistance – such as vouchers for energy or food, or support with mental illness (for example, updating benefit claims). As more and more contact with public services and other agencies has moved online, or to call centres, Citizens Advice centres are among the few remaining places where people in trouble can seek support face

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to face. Staff describe clients queueing for hours and arriving with bags full of bills. With no end in sight for the energy and food price inflation that makes daily life so hard, and with interest rates expected to rise further next year, the new year is more likely to bring further hardship than relief.

We know that many of our readers are horrified at the kinds of needs that the voluntary sector is expected to meet. But with public services including the NHS chronically overstretched, and council budgets decimated by austerity, the state is no longer capable of supporting many of those even in acute need – such as children – who have no capacity to support themselves. In areas such as housing, the current crisis is the consequence of years of neglect. Had the government invested in insulation, and passed laws giving tenants more protection, the number of households in crisis due to unaffordable bills, rents or poor maintenance (leading to problems including mould, and tragedies such as the death of Awaab Ishak) would be smaller.

In previous years, our readers' generosity has surpassed expectations – since 2015, you have contributed £10m to good causes. Together, we have been able to back projects ranging from nature conservation in Madagascar to mental health support for young people during the pandemic. Many people's finances are stretched at the moment, as inflation outstrips wage growth, particularly in the public sector – but research shows that people with less money are typically more generous in their charitable giving than those on the highest incomes. Please make a donation if you can – either online, or over the phone on 0151 284 1126. In our telethon on Saturday 17 December, some of our best-known journalists will be waiting to take your calls.

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

The Guardian view on King Charles: still on probation

Editorial

If his new reign was developing in the manner that King Charles III must have hoped, the main royal news of the week would have been his visit to the Houses of Parliament on Wednesday. There, the king did the kinds of things that British monarchs do, and received the kind of tributes they are accustomed to receiving. He talked to staff, met political leaders and unveiled a bronze plaque commemorating Elizabeth II's lying in state as well as two ornate beacons, gifts from the two Houses. In the words of the Commons speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the new beacons symbolised "the enduring and guiding light [the queen] has been to our nation – and indeed, the whole world – for the past 70 years".

Sadly for the king, this highly traditional visit to Westminster, with its deferential rhetoric of continuity and stability, was not the main royal news of the week at all. Instead, that was provided by Thursday's release of the final three distinctly undeferential episodes of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's Netflix documentary series.

The new episodes do not hold back. In one, Prince Harry lifts the curtain on a 2020 royal summit at Sandringham on the Sussexes' future at which, by his account, Prince William "screamed and shouted", and King Charles said "things that just simply weren't true", while the queen sat quietly thinking about how to safeguard the institution. In another, the duchess and her mother describe how Meghan's despair with the royal world – with its echoes of Diana, Princess of Wales a generation earlier – led her to think "all of this will stop if I'm not here" and to consider taking her own life.



▲ King Charles III and Prince Harry at the queen's committal service at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle in September. Photograph: RT/Francis Dias/Newspix International

These are shocking allegations. Along with the racism and misogyny detailed in the earlier episodes, they cast a miserable light, to put it mildly, over the way the British monarchy conducts itself. It is true, as the late queen put it in a statement, that "some recollections may vary" about some matters. It is also true that the greatest villains of this whole saga are not King Charles, Princes William or Harry, or any of the individual royals, but the relentlessly intrusive and hyperbolic British tabloid press and the lying and abusive world of social media. Nor do any of the main players, including the Sussexes themselves, emerge free of questions and perhaps criticism from these televised assaults. Saddest of all, surely, is the sight of so many unhappy people inside such a dysfunctional institution. Few of the principals appear undamaged, often seriously, by the pressures of the roles they play in front of an audience of sometimes infantilised millions.

Damaging though the Sussexes' campaigns are for Windsor family relations, they may not have much impact on the standing of the monarchy itself. A Savanta opinion poll this week finds 59% of the British public think that the documentaries are a bad idea, against 33% who think they are a good one. These figures mirror public attitudes to the institution itself, where 55% favour the monarchy against 31% who favour an elected head of state. That these figures are unchanged from the reign of Elizabeth II may cause King Charles to feel his own reign is settling in well. But with Harry's book due to suck up fresh oxygen in the new year, the new king is on probation. He is still only feeling his way towards the levels of public approval that, under his mother, provided such a bulwark to the monarchical system.

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.

Seth Meyers on Sam Bankman-Fried: 'A guy who looks the way Cheeto dust smells'

Guardian staff

Seth Meyers

Seth Meyers looked into the billion-dollar collapse of crypto exchange FTX on Wednesday evening, following the arrest of founder and CEO Sam Bankman-Fried in the Bahamas on Monday. Bankman-Fried (also known as SBF), "a guy who looks the way Cheeto dust smells", Meyers joked, is charged with defrauding customers out of billions of dollars in a massive years-long fraud.

"Oh, are billions of dollars missing? Have you checked the fanny pack where his weed dealer keeps all his tips?" Meyers said, referring to SBF's standard appearance of T-shirt, cargo shorts and unkempt hair.

"I can't believe this guy thought he could hide out in the Bahamas," Meyers said. "Usually when you think of international fugitive, you imagine a stylish jewel thief, not a guy in a T-shirt that clearly came out of a cannon at a basketball game. Dude was supposed to be a billionaire but he looks like he was thrown naked into a Goodwill and given 90 seconds to get dressed."



▲ Seth Meyers on FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried: 'Dude was supposed to be a billionaire but he looks like he was thrown naked into a Goodwill and given 90 seconds to get dressed.' Photograph: Youtube

Meyers marveled at the staggering financial mismanagement of FTX: John Ray III, the man brought in to clean up FTX after its bankruptcy filing, said never in his career had he seen "such a complete failure of corporate controls and such complete absence of trustworthy financial information".

Ray, who also took over Enron after its collapse in 2001, believed FTX fell apart because a "very small group of grossly inexperienced and unsophisticated individuals" running the company "failed to implement virtually any of the systems or controls" required to handle people's money.

"You know it's bad when even the guy who had to clean up the Enron scandal is horrified," said Meyers. "The only way this could get any worse is if you found out, I don't know, one of the key proponents of the Iraq war was somehow connected to …oh," he added over a photo of Bankman-Fried at a conference with Tony Blair.

"Why did it take until now for someone to figure out that this dude was grossly inexperienced and unsophisticated?" he wondered. "Wasn't it nice when con artists put a little more thought into their outfits?"

Stephen Colbert

On the Late Show, Stephen Colbert examined a new poll which found that in a hypothetical primary, Republican voters preferred Ron DeSantis to Donald Trump, 52% to 38%. "It's hard to know who to root for here," he said. "It's like a poll between gonorrhea and a slightly more racist gonorrhea.

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"With the insurrections and the Hitler dinners, only the most conservative are still backing the ex-president, while DeSantis is trouncing him with voters who consider themselves only 'somewhat' conservative," Colbert explained. "Basically, the folks who don't support gay marriage, but think Andy Cohen does a great job handling those housewives."

"So to take full command of the GOP, all DeSantis has to do is reel in the coveted conservative demographic of angry conspiracy QAnon all-meat diet tan your testicle boys," he added. And the Florida governor's "opening offer" to that crowd was calling for a grand jury investigation of Covid vaccines.

"You stupid mother-Pfizer," said Colbert. "You want an investigation? Let me save you some time and money: in the US alone, the Covid vaccines have saved more than 3 million lives and helped prevent 18.5 million hospitalizations."

"And because idiots in your party politicized the vaccine, almost twice as many Republicans died from Covid before the midterms than the Democrats. Y'all killed your own voters!"

Colbert played a montage of footage in which DeSantis encouraged Floridians to get vaccines, testifying to their safety. "That's evidence right there that it causes genetic side effects," the host noted. "Because this guy used to promote the vaccine, but once he got it, he turned into a huge dick bag."

Jimmy Kimmel

And in Los Angeles, Jimmy Kimmel mocked Trump's latest attempt to salvage an already faltering 2024 presidential campaign. "He got a premature election and now he's desperate to shift attention away from his waning popularity," the host explained.

On Wednesday, "rant-a-claus" posted on Truth Social that he would make a "major" announcement the following day. "The tan-of-steel posted 'AMERICA NEEDS A SUPERHERO'" Kimmel laughed. "What could it be? Maybe he got liposuction? Maybe Eric learned to tie his shoes? Who knows?"

In other news, newly Elon Musk-owned Twitter reportedly hasn't paid rent on its offices for weeks. "Of all the problems I would've guessed the second richest man in the world would have, paying rent wasn't one of them," Kimmel said. "Maybe he should change the name from Twitter to Squatter. Maybe he finally read the Art of the Deal and now he's doing it Trump style."

Adam Driver's new film 65 blasts dinosaurs into extinction. What's not to love?

Stuart Heritage



▲ *Capital-A Acting … Adam Driver in 65. Photograph: Sony Pictures*

Let's cast our minds back to early February. This is when Moonfall, Roland Emmerich's latest sci-fi disaster film, was released to a near-deafening shrug of apathy from the general public. Moonfall cost almost $150m to make, but in the months since its release has only managed to recoup $67m. It is currently the 13th biggest flop in the entire history of cinema (almost certainly).

Moonfall was a film about the moon threatening to plummet out of the sky and crash into Earth. And yet, somehow, the film failed to find an audience. I am telling you this because soon there will be a film about Adam Driver accidentally going back in time and shooting a load of dinosaurs with some sort of space gun. And, by God, we must protect this film with our lives.

The film is called 65 (because dinosaurs lived on Earth until 65 million years ago) and nobody has high hopes for it; not least because many scientists now believe that dinosaurs actually became extinct 66 million years ago, so by rights this should really just be a film about Adam Driver accidentally going back in time and finding a bunch of million-year-old dinosaur corpses.

And yet the 65 trailer was released yesterday and, by God, try to stop yourself from rooting for it. The whole thing looks preposterous: the premise is hokey, the special effects look rubbish, and Adam Driver appears to be capital-A Acting with enough ferocious intensity to make Marriage Story look like Digby the Big Red Dog. But at the same time I sort of want to watch it a hundred times in a row with everyone I've ever met.

It helps that 65 has enormous pedigree. As well as Driver being on board, the film is being produced by Sam Raimi, has Danny Elfman as a composer and is written and directed by Scott Beck and Bryan Woods. Beck and Woods, you'll remember, wrote A Quiet Place. But they didn't write A Quiet Place Part II, and given how that turned out you have to assume they were the ones who made the first film good.

So maybe 65, a film where – and let's be clear – Adam Driver from Marriage Story goes back in time and blasts a ton of dinosaurs in the face with what to all intents and purposes is a laser gun, could beat the odds and become the best film that has ever been made. The trailer certainly suggests that this might be a possibility. It bristles with so much confidence that it doesn't even bother to hide the plot's biggest twist. Most trailers would hide the fact that, although he thinks he is on an alien planet, Adam Driver is actually on Earth. Of course they would. That would rob the film of its surprise, gaspworthy ending. But not 65. Within the first two minutes of the trailer, some text pops up onscreen and basically says "Nah, just messing, they're on Earth". And you really have to admire chutzpah of that magnitude.

It also helps that Adam Driver has a companion on his quest to, I don't know, kill all of the dinosaurs in the world. The companion is one of those wide-eyed, near-mute children that sci-fi occasionally likes to fling at us. The child here only has a few lines in the trailer, and they mostly consist of her repeating the last word of whatever Adam Driver has just said to her, which makes her sound a bit like an irreparably traumatised Beastie Boy. Anyway, she barely does anything, which gives Adam Driver lots of opportunities to make the veins in his neck stick out, which is always a visual prompt to help the audience understand that he is doing good acting.

Plus, I really think I was right with that quest thing. The movie is called 65. Not 75. Not 103. It is named after the year when the dinosaurs were wiped from the face of the planet. Call me a crazy dreamer, but I am now convinced that 65 will be a Tarantino-style piece of revisionist history, where Adam Driver murders thousands of dinosaurs to the point of extinction.

You'd go and see that, wouldn't you? I would, multiple times. And this is why, while on paper it has "Moonfall-level flop" written all over it, we must all find it within ourselves to make 65 the hit it deserves to be.

'I have to stand up and fight': can a playwright save his Broadway show from closing early?

David Smith in Washington

It is the call that every playwright dreads. Jordan E Cooper, whose Ain't No Mo earned critical plaudits on Broadway, was informed that his beloved show will close on Sunday – just 17 days after opening.

But instead of wallowing in self-pity, Cooper, the youngest Black American playwright to have a show on Broadway, is trying to fight back. He published an open letter urging people to buy tickets and give the production a stay of execution. His defiant stand has gathered support from actor and drag queen RuPaul and Hollywood stars Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith.

"I don't think it got a fair shot," the 27-year-old said to the Guardian by phone from New York. "If a play gets a fair shot and it doesn't work it's like, OK, I got a fair shot. But if the play feels like no, it's so much bigger than what it's getting right now, than the resources that it has right now, than the marketing that it has right now then I feel I have to stand up and fight because I think this play represents the future in a way. It represents other playwrights who are going to come in with plays that are just as challenging and might not have Denzel Washington to star in it."

Ain't No Mo premiered at the Public Theater in 2019. With a mix of sketch, satire, avant garde and drag, it poses a provocative question: what if the US government offered Black Americans one-way plane tickets to Africa? Jesse Green, theatre critic of the New York Times, described it as "thrilling, bewildering, campy, shrewd, mortifying, scary, devastating and deep". Cooper, who is also a member of the cast, recalls that Steven Spielberg described it as the most cinematic play he had ever seen.

"It started off being an exploration of what it would be like if all Black people in America got an email saying that they have to go back to Africa. You watch all these different people around the country decide whether or not they're getting on that final flight out. That came from my own kind of exploration of trying to find some way out; trying to find the light in the darkness; trying to find the laughter in the pain.

"Where that came from was seeing all these unarmed Black men and Black women being killed and murdered within weeks of each other. I was like, what if we all just left it behind? What if we just said bye, we're not doing this any more. The play came from that

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Continued *from page 32*

idea and then, as I started writing it, I realised it wasn't as easy as everybody thought it was and it wasn't as romantic as we thought it was, so maybe it takes some work."

The show's transfer to Broadway was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic but it finally opened at the Belasco Theatre on 1 December before an audience that included Gabrielle Union (a co-producer), Matthew Broderick, Tamron Hall, Gayle King and Tony Kushner. Cooper describes the reaction from audiences so far as "mind-blowing" with people standing outside the theatre chanting: "Ain't No Mo!"

So it came as a kick to the solar plexus last week when producer Lee Daniels announced that the show would have to go dark abruptly on Sunday after a meagre 22 previews and 21 regular performances. The entertainment website Deadline reported that last week the show took in only $120,901 at the box office – not sufficient to cover its running costs.

Cooper received a call from Daniels himself with the bad news. "I think he was trying to soften the blow a bit and I was shocked, not necessarily because I didn't understand where it was coming from – it takes time to get an audience – but I just didn't think that it would happen so quickly.

"We hadn't necessarily gone through every route that we could to find an audience. We had no billboards; we didn't have buses; we didn't have subways; we didn't have a TV commercial. Our marketing budget wasn't huge because we were depending on people



▲ *'I believe that people deserve to see these performances and people deserve to hear this story' … Jordan E Cooper. Photograph: Stephen Lovekin/REX/Shutterstock*

seeing the play and word of mouth. It just takes a little bit more time when you don't have a celebrity lead or you don't have IP that people recognise, especially on Broadway right now."

He elaborates: "It's hard for Broadway period after the pandemic but it's even harder when you're a niche show with not recognisable stars and material and you're a show of colour, which is even harder, especially with a show like this that's written for everybody but specifically for the Black community.

"A lot of people that watch me had no idea that it existed. We didn't have any billboards on 125th and Malcolm X, we didn't have any billboards in Harlem and Brooklyn and these places where I felt people who would enjoy the show but didn't get a chance to know about the show. We didn't have time to do any of that so it just came as a shock."

But with a burning sense of injustice, Cooper refused to take it lying down. He published an open letter pleading for help, describing Ain't No Mo as "a new original PLAY that's BLACK AF, which are both things that make it hard to sell on Broadway". He wrote that an eviction notice had been posted for 18 December "but thank God Black people are immune to eviction notices. The Wiz got one on Opening Night in 1974, but audiences turned that around and it ended up running for four years."

He ended the letter by pointing out the average ticket price is $50 to make the show accessible. "In the name of art, in the name of resistance, in the name of we belong here too, in the name of every story telling ancestor who ever graced a Broadway stage or was told they never could, BUY A TICKET and come have church with us. Radical Black work belongs on Broadway too."

The appeal struck a nerve. Co-producer RuPaul will host a special performance on Thursday. Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith bought out a performance this week to show their support as did Tyler Perry. Cooper was interviewed by civil rights leader the Rev Al Sharpton on the MSNBC network's influential Morning Joe programme.

The pandemic caused the longest shutdown in Broadway history while the police murder of George Floyd, and ensuing Black Lives Matter protests, forced a racial reckoning for this industry as for many others. When theatres reopened in autumn 2021, there were a record seven works by Black playwrights. The current season includes The Piano Lesson by August Wilson, Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks, Ohio State Murders by 91-year-old Adrienne Kennedy and A Strange Loop, a new musical by Michael R Jackson that won a Pulitzer prize and Tony award but will close next month.

But in a blow to diversity efforts KPOP, a musical celebrating the popular Korean music genre of the same name with a predominantly Asian and Asian American cast, closed last Sunday after just 44 previews and 17 regular performances. It was Broadway's first Korean-centered musical written by Korean Americans and the first with an Asian female composer. Overall ticket sales have still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Cooper reflects: "We've come so far but we've got so far to go. The fact that A Strange Loop is on Broadway is amazing. The fact that it was a hit on Broadway is amazing. But also A Strange Loop is the only show to win a Pulitzer prize and win a Tony for best musical and close before playing a year."

As for Ain't No Mo, he will not go



▲ *Jordan E Cooper in Ain't No Mo. Photograph: Joan Marcus*

down without a fight. "I take a step back and ask myself, is this show good? I say it's excellent. These performances that these actors are giving are not your normal Broadway performances. Literally six different people play like 20 different characters and they play them to the bone, they play them like full human beings and change in a matter of seconds. It's masterful.

"I believe that people deserve to see these performances and people deserve to hear this story. It's a truly wild and outrageous yet heart wrenching story. If there ever was an American play that deserves to be seen on a Broadway stage, I believe that this is the kind of story that deserves it. The plays and the playwrights that come after it in this lineage deserve that same right."

James Patterson to complete unfinished Michael Crichton book

Benjamin Lee

The bestselling author James Patterson is set to complete an unfinished manuscript from the late Michael Crichton.

According to the Wall Street Journal, Crichton's estate has provided him with over 100 pages of a novel about the imminent eruption of Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano, which threatens a secret cache of deadly chemical weapons. Just last month, the volcano did start erupting.

"Michael's ability to tell a story that is propulsive while you learn things about the subject area he's writing about is what pulled me in," Patterson said. He said he never met Crichton, but knows him "through his books".

Crichton died in 2008, leaving behind a career of books including Jurassic Park, The Andromeda Strain, Congo and Sphere, all of which were also adapted into films. In 2020, it was announced that Sphere would be adapted again into a TV series for HBO Max. Crichton also wrote and directed 1973's Westworld.



▲ *James Patterson, who has sold more than 425m books worldwide. Photograph: Taylor Jewell/AP*

The author's widow Sherri Crichton, the chief executive of CrichtonSun, a company that oversees the estate, found the manuscript after his death.

"Michael had been working on this book for years, it was his passion project and centered in the place that inspired him the most, Hawaii," she said.

She added that her late husband had done extensive research including interviews with volcanologists and location scouting.

In 2016, she also found a finished manuscript which was later published as Dragon Teeth in 2017.

Patterson's books have sold over 425m copies. His works include the Women's Murder Club and Middle School series. Patterson's best known series is led by detective Alex Cross, who has been played by Morgan Freeman and Tyler Perry on screen. A series starring Aldis Hodge in the role is also currently in the works. Patterson also co-authored a thriller with Bill Clinton in 2021.

The as-yet-untitled book is set to be published in 2024.

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Kermit and Fozzie: 'I'd like to try The Great British Bake Off – especially if it was custard pies'

As told to Rich Pelley

Let's talk size here, guys: are you, Kermit, a very big frog, or are you, Fozzie – like Tom Cruise – a very small bear? *Abney15*Kermit: I'm your average size frog, especially in my family. As one of more than 2,000-plus siblings, I'm smack dab in the middle in order of height: not as small as my sister, Kismet, or as big as my brother, Kromit.Fozzie: Tom Cruise is a bear? I didn't know that. I've got to go see his movies again. You'd think I'd notice something like that.

I imagine you'd be great teamed together on the BBC's Bargain Hunt. Would you be up for it? *Murdomania*K: Bargain Hunt sounds like fun. But if you want a real bargain hunter, you should call Miss Piggy. She really knows how to find a bargain … then ignore it and buy the most expensive thing in the store.F: I think I'd like to try The Great British Bake Off, especially if we were making custard pies. Along with rubber chickens and whoopee cushions, custard pies are a big part of my act.

My dad and I traditionally decorate the house for Christmas while watching The Muppet Christmas Carol. What holiday traditions do you enjoy with your family? *Wackawacka30*K: Oh, that's so nice to hear. We're thrilled that The Muppet Christmas Carol has become part of so many families' holiday traditions. We've tried watching the movie while we decorate, but everyone except me ends up watching the movie, and I end up doing all the decorating. So now we wait until after we put up the holly, tinsel and tree.F: The big tradition among bears is the Passing of the Fruitcake. It's been in our family for generations, but no one has been brave enough to take a bite. Legend has it that the bear that bites the fruitcake will either become king of all bears or break a tooth … or both.

I once had the privilege of working on set with the great Michael Caine, and asked him which film he had enjoyed making the most. Without hesitation, he said: "Muppet Christmas Carol." As a then jobbing actor, has he ever thanked you for the lift you gave his career? *JoaquinSafari andJAYJ1111*K: We gave Sir Michael's career a lift? I wouldn't exactly put it that way. We're just frogs, pigs, bears and *whatevers*, and he's a classically trained thespian.F: I thought he was an actor?K: Same thing, Fozzie. In any case, Sir Michael is a good friend and we were honoured to share the screen with him. By the way, he's nothing like Scrooge. He's very generous. He even loaned his Oscar to Miss Piggy, although I'm not sure she ever gave it back.



▲ *'Jim Henson? He was the best' … Kermit and Fozzie. Composite: Cindy Ord/Getty Images/ Guardian Design*

Would you ever make Muppet Die Hard, with Miss Piggy as Hans Gruber, or Muppet Alien, with Piggy as Ripley? Or Muppet Breaking Bad, with Dr Bunsen Honeydew as Walter White, Beaker as Jesse, Waldorf as Hector Salamanca and Kermit as Gustavo Fring, a respected pillar of the community known for his charitable works; the perfect front to disguise his vast criminal empire? *YorkshireExPat, RexPowerColt, Chancre and funkapuss*K: I can honestly say that at no point have we ever considered any of those possibilities. But thanks for the suggestions.F: What about your nephew, Robin the Frog, who played Tiny Tim? Hasn't he got some Muppet Christmas Carol sequels in development?K: Oh, right. Robin wants to take Tiny Tim in a whole new direction. He's been pitching Muppet Christmas Carol 2: Tiny Tim Winter Soldier! and Tiny Tim in the Multiverse of Mistletoe, but so far, no takers.

C'mon Kermit, spill the beans … both you and Miss Piggy look fantastic. Have you had surgery, or are your porky/amphibian genes to thank? Do you foresee yourself ever getting back with Piggy?*kmansley, davidabsalom and trhodsey*K: I cannot speak for Miss Piggy, but I've never had cosmetic surgery of any kind. I stay looking so young because, as a frog, I spend at least an hour a day soaking in pond scum. Try it, and I bet you'll come out looking as green and wet behind the ears as me.F: What ears?K: It's a figure of speech, Fozzie. As for Piggy and I getting together again, we are still good friends and love working together, so anything is possible.

Do you ever audition for other roles? Kermit: Yoda, Hulk, or Shrek? And Fozzie: Paddington, Winnie the Pooh or Yogi Bear? Or are you all friends? *25aubrey and TopTramp*K: Yoda and Hulk are both good friends, and I am frequently mistaken for them, despite my lack of ears and pectorals. I think that they are both perfectly cast. As for going after other roles, I audition all the time, but for some reason Tom Hanks and Tom Cruise seem to get all the really cool parts. I think it must have something to do with them both being named Tom, not Kermit.

Kermit, you commented "it's not easy being green" years before the climate emergency hit the headlines. Are you some sort of frog Nostradamus, and if so, what do you predict next? *Prospero*K: I've never tried to predict the future, but I do think it is getting easier to be green … and so many folks are doing their part to make the world a greener planet that will be here for future generations of people, pigs and frogs.

Losing Jim Henson must have been so difficult. What are your favourite memories? *KayBee123*K: Jim was the best. He made us who we are – quite literally. He was always there to lend a hand and give us a lift. But most of all, my favourite memory of Jim was his laugh. When we'd get truly silly, he'd double over with laughter. It made us all know we were right where we belonged. Jim is why we're still out there doing what we do. We'll never forget him.

I sometimes call my girlfriend a muppet. Is this wrong? *Obo1971*K: Not at all. If she can juggle, we'd be happy to have her join us. We're always looking for good jugglers.

Watching Lady Gaga in her Kermit outfit must have been akin to Basil Brush witnessing Beyoncé flouncing about in fox fur. Does it give you nightmares? *McScootikins*K: I loved Lady Gaga's jacket of Kermits. No actual frogs were hurt in the making of that jacket – it was actually made of my cousins, who are all trained stunt frogs. Ever see the frog storm in Magnolia? That was their first gig.

What was it like singing Rainbow Connection with Debbie Harry on The Muppet Show? Who is your dream Rainbow Connection duet? *Kowalski and AlexClarke*K: I had an amazing time. How lucky am I that I've gotten to sing such a beautiful song with so many incredible artists over the years? Ed Sheeran, John Legend, Tori Kelly, Queen Latifah, Nina West … the list goes on and on! Honestly, they've all been dream duets for me.

Fozzie, I met you in Scarborough in 1978 with my granny and we had our photos taken with you. She loved a good laugh. What's your favourite joke? *sgbfab*F: My favourite joke?! Oh gosh, it's impossible to pick just one! Kermit, you pick one!K: Uh, me? Gee, well Fozzie, I dunno, they're all so funny.F: When you're right, you're right! How 'bout I just tell my favourite Christmas joke instead. Ready? What did everyone say about Rudolph's first Christmas Eve flight? He got glowing reviews!K: That's a little on the nose, don't you think?F: Ahhhh! That's funn-eee!



▲ *Michael Caine as Ebenezer Scrooge in The Muppet Christmas Carol, from 1992. Photograph: Disney/Sportsphoto/Allstar*

Kermit, if I kiss you, will you turn into my handsome prince? *TurangaLeela2*K: I'm not sure I'd turn into anything other than the object of Miss Piggy's wrath.

Do ever wish you were human? *Hemmings66*F: No. There are a lot of human comedians out there, but I've got the standup comedy bear niche all to myself, and I like it that way.K: I wouldn't want to be human either. I like being a frog. You get to sit on a log, swim in a swamp and not wear clothes. What's not to love? It's like my song, Being Green, says: "I am green and it'll do fine. It's beautiful and I think it's what I wanna be."

I'm a fan on the autism spectrum. I love you guys so much. Watching your shows and movies always makes me feel better. Thank you for making the world a better place. *GoNzO14*K: Thank you, *GoNzO14!* You are the reason we do what we do.F: And please remember to laugh when I do my act. Wocka wocka!

● The Muppet Christmas Carol vinyl picture disc is out now on Walt Disney Records/UMR.

Best movies of 2022 in the US: No 7 – The Wonder

Adrian Horton

Chilean director Sebastián Lelio's adaptation of Emma Donoghue's 2016 novel is a completely absorbing descent into the mist – of 1860s Ireland, of mysticism, of religious fervour. Put aside the distracting framing device, two present-tense bookends assumedly meant to underscore our ability to suspend disbelief that end up undercutting this eerie, remarkable period film.



▲ *'Eerie, remarkable' … Kíla Lord Cassidy, Tom Burke and Florence Pugh in The Wonder. Photograph: Aidan Monaghan/AP*

The vibe is off, the mood unsettling, from the moment we meet Florence Pugh's Lib, an English nurse sent to a remote Irish village to observe (or, as many townspeople hope, to confirm) a reported miracle: 11-year-old Anna (an impressive Kíla Lord Cassidy) who has refused to eat for four months and yet remains curiously healthy. Lelio's film approaches Anna's anorexia mirabilis as a slow-burn mystery, as Lib grows fond of the girl and ever more frustrated with the inaction of those around her, people willing to accept sacrifice to preserve their preferred version of the story. It's a thriller of fact versus faith that doesn't judge the latter.

It also reaffirms faith in Pugh as a performer, in a thorny period role that recalls her breakout in Lady Macbeth. Pugh has yet to turn in a less than solid performance, particularly as a woman bristling at expectations, and she is utterly convincing here. Her Lib is fiery and steadfast, rational and susceptible as anyone to flights of desperate imagination. Pugh is almost terrifyingly self-possessed as a performer; as Lib's frustration with her assignment and desperation to save Anna escalate, I found myself clenching my teeth, transfixed.

What could easily have become melodrama or a cheap trauma plot instead feels, in Lelio's hands, strange and beautiful, shot through with the natural ruggedness of rural Ireland. The Wonder is an unusual journey, Lelio's sharp direction never allowing what could be foreseeable revelations to tip into predictability. But it's Pugh who's the wonder here. Even with the framing device – yes, this is a story – you can't help but believe her.

Best designs of 2022: 'This work is a beacon of hope'

What was your favourite design of 2022? We asked creatives and design world insiders for the exhibitions, architecture, furniture and innovations that made this year just a little bit better. Here are their answers.

Diébédo Francis Kére's Startup Lions ICT Center education campus, Kenya, 2022

chosen by Priya Khanchandani, head of curatorial, Design Museum

The beauty of Kére's architecture is its power to create a sense of place. He legitimises this building within its landscape through the use of locally sourced quarry stone with a plaster finish, the mirroring of the natural architecture of surrounding termite mounds, and the careful dialogue between spaces in and around the building. This year, Kére became the first African architect to win the Pritzker Prize and the campus shows the humble generosity and poetry of his work in a part of the world that is still reclaiming its place in global cultural discourse.

Pierre Huyghe's Variants at Kistefos, Norway

Selected by Anders Byriel, CEO at textile brand, Kvadrat

At the Kistefos sculpture park in Javnaker, near Oslo, the French artist Pierre Huyghe had made a landmark intervention in nature involving a previously inaccessible island that is prone to flooding. His installation includes an LED screen that shows an alternate reality to our world. Also in Oslo, I visited Ekebergparken, where I saw Huma Bhabha's wild sculpture titled We Come in Peace and it took my breath away.

ProxyAddress

Selected by muralist and designer Camille Walala

I love the idea behind ProxyAddress – a brilliant solution to a problem that really shouldn't exist. If you haven't got a fixed address, you're basically cut off from society (everything from GP services to bank accounts). Developed by architect Chris Hildrey, this scheme creates a secure system that offers anyone facing homelessness the chance to borrow a 'proxy' address. This virtual address moves with them, reconnecting them with the support and services they need at the time they need them most. ProxyAddress was piloted in London this year, and I'm excited to see it go nationwide in the near future.

Homo Faber 2022 in Venice

Picked by editor of Hole & Corner, Tamsin Blanchard

I was blown away by the Homo Faber 2022 event in Venice in a Palladian monastery on San Maggiore island. Organised by the Michelangelo Foundation, it took the form of 15 exhibitions across the island. Of the 850 works on display, the highlight was 12 Japanese Living Treasures designed by Naoto Fukasawa. The Living Treasures are designated to preserve intangible cultural heritage crafts which might otherwise die out, including the worlds of pottery, textiles, dollmaking and lacquerware.



▲ *Clockwise from left, Petal lamp by Rikke Frost, objects from Designing Motherhood, artist Darren Appiagyei, orange used by biomaterial company Orange Fiber Photograph: Alex Mellon*

Danish designer Rikke Frost

Chosen by Knud Erik Hansen, CEO of Carl Hansen & Son

When looking back on 2022, one of my personal design highlights is the Danish designer Rikke Frost and her breakthrough on the international design stage. In 2022, Frost has launched several designs and received the Wallpaper Award for her Petal Lamp. She has a refreshing way of combining traditional and contemporary design, and her organic design idiom is achieved through an interesting mix of natural materials and craftsmanship methods.

Body Vessel Clay at Two Temple Place, London

Selected by artist and woodworker Darren Appiagyei

I have to pick the Body Vessel Clay exhibition at Two Temple Place. It was hugely inspiring to see the Nigerian ceramicist Ladi Kwali's sculptural vessels and to understand the influence she has had on three generations of Black women makers. The exhibition offered a beacon of hope.

RE Morris General Store, Lowestoft High Street, UK

Chosen by Amber Butchart, dress historian and curator

Lowestoft is my hometown, and this building on the High Street has always fascinated me. It was a Georgian dispensing chemist with an ornate frontage, complete with pharmacist bottles and jars in the windows. I was really sad to see it closed down a couple of years ago. This summer it rose from the ashes as RE Morris General Store stocking hardware goods and kitchenalia. The owners even commissioned a historic paint report so they could take the store back to its original colour, and they've kept and restored the original frontage and display. It's a beautifully designed building filled with beautifully designed, useful things, and it's a delight to see it flourish when so many of our high streets are in dire trouble. I hope it will be there for another 200 years.

Designing Motherhood

Chosen by Paloma Gormley director of architects practice Material Cultures

I thought the exhibition and beautifully designed book from the Designing Motherhood organisation were important, insightful and intelligently curated. It looks at around 100 design objects that have defined the experience of reproduction and the relationship between mother, child and wider society – from the breast pump to the C-section curtain. A long-overdue, taboo-busting project that kickstarts some much-needed conversations about the impact design and material culture continue to have on the lived reality of motherhood.

Objects of Desire: Surrealism and Desire 1924 – Today at London's Design Museum

Selected by artist and designer Morag Myerscough

When I visited this exhibition about how surrealism influenced furniture, fashion and interiors recently, I felt excited. It features work by Man Ray and Leonora Carrington, as well as Schiaparelli. I think it's the best exhibition the Design Museum has done for a few years. It's rich with thought-provoking, playful objects.

Dior Pre-Fall menswear collection 2023 show in Egypt

Selected by Lee Broom, light and furniture designer

My design highlight is something that actually only just happened. I am a big fan of Kim Jones, and particularly everything he does for Dior menswear, and his latest collection for pre-fall 2023 was a feast for the eyes. I love the dramatic location set against the pyramids of Giza and the way that these incredible ancient monuments were illuminated for the show in such a dynamic and creative way. The collection itself was also meticulously executed, which enhanced the whole experience. Every so often there is an epic moment in fashion and I believe that this was one of those.

Fashioning Design: Lee Broom (Rizzoli) is out now

Let Me Hold You at Queercircle, London

Selected by designer Adam Nathaniel Furman, co-author of Queer Spaces

My favourite exhibition of 2022 was the remarkable, immersive, intensely beautiful and profound 'Let Me Hold You' by Michaela Yearwood-Dan, which kicked off the brilliant curatorial programme at Queercircle in Design District, North Greenwich. Michaela's piece was a genre-defying installation of pure, expressive colour that burned through notions of propriety and the orderliness of binaries, meshing furniture, ceramics, space and conversation into a queer maelstrom of artistic vivacity – what a way for a new Queer Space to appear on the scene!

New Finnish furniture brand Vaarnii

Selected by award-winning designer Tom Dixon

One of our people, Antti Hirvonen, went off to create his own brand of brutal furniture in Finnish pine, Vaarnii – I'm very impressed by the single-mindedness of the brand: single material, single aesthetic, many designers.

Eternally Yours at Somerset House, London

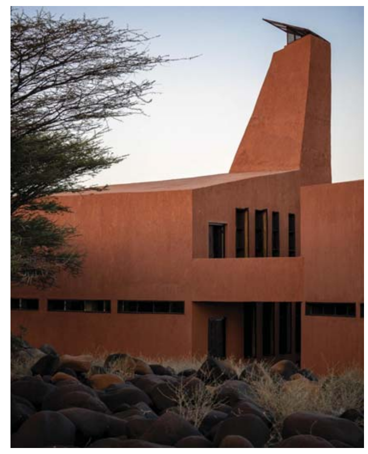
Selected by Suzie de Rohan Willner, CEO of Toast clothing and homeware

A highlight for me this year was Somerset House's summer exhibition, Eternally Yours, which explored the unexpectedly hopeful and healing stories that the act of repair reveals. Toast hosted the Renewal workshop space alongside the exhibition, where we gave visitors the opportunity to learn repair skills with our repair specialists and other artists. Coming out of the pandemic, this felt like a fitting cultural moment to explore individual and collective healing.

F51 skatepark in Folkestone, UK

Selected by Oliver Wainwright, Guardian architecture critic

Sometimes the best buildings come about by chance. When architect Guy Hollaway was approached to design a multistorey car park in Folkestone, it just so happened that a nearby skatepark was looking for a new home.



▲ *Startup Lions Campus in Kenya designed by Kéré Architecture Photograph: Kinan Deeb/Kéré Architecture*

The result? What would have been a blunt storage rack of petrol-guzzling machines instead became a thrilling vertical temple to adrenaline – creating a new home for skating, BMXing, climbing and boxing across its undulating floors, its walls covered with lively local street art to boot. May all car parks find such brighter futures.

Italian biomaterials company Orange Fiber

Picked by Ivan Calimani, founder of circular product company Krill Design

We are always inspired by start-ups and innovative projects that help to construct a better world. We appreciate the works of Orange Fiber, an Italian brand that produces vegan fabric sourcing the same material as we do: Sicilian orange peels. We believe biomaterials will contribute to making a positive change in the world, especially if they are manufactured in a short supply chain.

Vases by Welsh sculptor Eleanor Lakelin

Selected by interior designer and leatherworker Bill Amberg

I first saw Welsh sculptor Eleanor Lakelin's work at Sarah Myerscough's stand at PAD art fair in London and I was blown away by it. These vases in scorched and oiled horse chestnut are nearly 1.5m high and are beautifully crafted and thoughtful pieces.

Artist Fabien Cappello's mosaics at Design Miami

Chosen by Nicolas Pickaerts, co-founder of Abask

I saw design gallery the AGO Project's joyful colour palette at the Design Miami art fair last month. It really captured my eye. French designer Fabien Cappello's mosaics for AGO Project remind me of the summer months and alfresco dining – memories I love.

The 50 best albums of 2022 – 50 to 7

Safi Bugel, Shaad D'Souza and Laura Snapes

50

Phoenix – Alpha Zulu

People are fond of criticising Phoenix frontman Thomas Mars for writing cryptic or nonsensical lyrics. I say: listen a little deeper, won't you? Alpha Zulu, Phoenix's seventh album, interrogates middle-aged ennui with razor-sharp wit, imbuing intoxicatingly sensory synthpop songs with deeply sad lyrics about the tensions between work and love. It ends with Identical, a tribute to the band's late longtime producer Philippe Zdar, which also happens to be one of the band's all-timer anthems – a eulogy to close out the biggest festival stage in the world. *SD*

49

Tove Lo – Dirt Femme

The Swedish pop star's fifth – and first independent – album works as a decent primer for anyone who hasn't been paying attention to the past few years in pop. It's got Dua-style disco

Continued *on page 37*

Continued *from page 35*

(thanks in part to sharing a collaborator in SG Lewis), Charli XCX's death drive and one of those now-ubiquitous, infuriatingly catchy Y2K pop interpolations in 2 Die 4, which, quite bafflingly, samples Crazy Frog's 2005 cover of Gershon Kingsley's 1969 song Popcorn. Consequently Tove Lo is less of an eye-popping presence here than on her previous records, though her apparent recalcitrance makes her unusual anxiety and conflict around relationships and intensity all the more striking. *LS*

48

Kojey Radical – Reasons to Smile

Kojey Radical's debut album finally arrived this year and, while a lot of long-gestating debuts can fall flat on arrival, Reasons to Smile was worth the wait. Its interplay of hip-hop grit and neo-soul smoothness is kinetic and hypnotic, like watching oil and vinegar try to emulsify. Radical himself is the glue between Reasons to Smile's warring sides, a grinning, gloriously charismatic guide through his universe. *SD*

47

Earl Sweatshirt – Sick!

During a season of loss and introversion, an artist who made his name considering those states of being surprised listeners by expanding his purview, reaching outwards to forge connection – it's there too in the warmth of the vintage soul-tinged production – and define some sense of freedom on his terms. It's a beautiful example of Earl's proclivity to defy expectations: on Sick!, the new father watches older members of his family die and reassesses his place in their lineage, past and future; he grapples with pain, how to process it rather than let it "fester into hate", and works to stay present, aware of how "life can change in the blink of an eye". *LS*

46

Danger Mouse and Black Thought – Cheat Codes

Danger Mouse, the defining producer of the 2000s, and Roots MC Black Thought have been working together for years, but their long-mooted full-length collab didn't properly materialise until this summer. The result is soulful and whip-smart, and makes good on the promise of their first outing together, the 2005 Dangerdoom track Mad Nice: Cheat Codes contains granite-solid bars, luxuriant and sample-heavy beats in one of the most perfect producer/MC pairings of the past 20 years. *SD*

45

Special Interest – Endure

After six years on the DIY circuit, 2022 saw the New Orleans punk outfit head towards the mainstream. Compared with their back catalogue of distorted guitars and industrial synthesis, Endure was notably more pop-aligned, with buoyant keys and groovy riffs wrestling against lead singer Alli Logout's grizzled vocals and a chugging drum machine. It was a change that felt like a liberating step forward, learning to embrace the more playful side of punk, rather than a sellout move. *SB*

44

Julia Jacklin – Pre Pleasure

Julia Jacklin's first two records are rooted in relentless, cathartic self-interrogation. But Pre Pleasure is about picking yourself up, stepping over the strange entrails of truth you unearthed, and trying to remember who you are without the baggage and bad vibes. Pre Pleasure is all pristine, gently loping arrangements and reminders to stay healthy, stay happy, have some fun. It's not a *live, laugh, love* album as much as a reminder to let yourself off the hook every once in a while. As Jacklin whispers on Ignore Tenderness, with more than a tiny wink: "Go on, let it all out." *SD*

43

Suede – Autofiction

On Suede's ninth album, Brett Anderson is in a reflective mood, contemplating the loss of his mother and his roles as a father, lover and performer, and how the latter cross paths with the younger versions of himself that populate his memories. It's a nostalgic nook that many rock stars of his vintage find themselves in once they hit middle age – but unlike many rock stars of his vintage, Anderson bucks the expectation to frame these ruminations as a swan song. Instead he tackles them with all the guts, rage and euphoria of a young man with those evolutions and incarnations still ahead of him. *LS*

42

Alex G – God Save the Animals

When asked by Pitchfork why his ninth album was so awash in religious imagery, Alex Giannascoli replied: "A few people that I'm close to became religious. It made me wonder what they found." God Save the Animals suggests that what they found may have been, plainly, ease – a contentment and faith in the world that's been hard to find on Giannascoli's past few albums. Although he may be as neurotic and searching as ever, God Save the Animals finds him zeroing in on tiny moments of relief from the anxieties of the world, trudging up a never-ending hill and telling himself a mantra steeped in earnestness and irony: "Every day is a blessing." *SD*



▲ *From left … Blane Muise AKA Shygirl, Nilüfer Yanya and Steve Lacy. Illustration: Guardian Design/Samuel Ibram/Shutterstock/David Levene*

41

Oliver Sim – Hideous Bastard

The greatest trick pulled by the xx is in how joint singers Romy Madley Croft and Oliver Sim dissolve their personal perspectives into an alluring, all-embracing whole. But on Sim's debut album, he considers the many ways he has tried to disappear in his life – denial, fear, isolation, shame – and weighs up their cost. The antidote, Hideous Bastard suggests, is in unvarnished, often unflattering honesty; the slinky, seductive, often twisted music, produced by Sim's bandmate Jamie xx, creates the perfect uncanny spotlight for it. *LS*

40

Alabaster DePlume – Gold – Go Forward in the Courage of Your Love

One of the year's most confronting albums didn't deal in noise or aggression, but deeply insistent compassion. "Don't forget you're precious," the Manchester jazz poet insists across Gold, one of the album's many such mantras. These are hard messages for anyone inclined to self-criticism to hear – and DePlume (AKA Gus Fairbairn) counts himself among them, laying bare his struggle to remember his own worth. In doing so he dodges the sentimentality that might otherwise overwhelm a record that proceeds with both palms held upright to the sky. And the sincerity of his mission is evident in its real-world application, with the eerie rhythms, heart-caressing vocal harmonies and vulnerable horns imperceptibly stitched together from days of improvisation with various different ensembles. If we can't remember that we're precious, he seems to suggest, being in community with others might remind us. *LS*

39

The Weather Station – How Is It That I Should Look at the Stars

Tamara Lindeman couldn't have had any idea what was to come when she sat down at the piano from 10-12 March 2020 to record How Is It That I Should Look at the Stars. On the companion album to last year's Ignorance, she weighs up what kind of uncertainty we can tolerate living with – and what the point of certainty is in a world in flux. Her conclusions, at least when it comes to politics and the environment, are less than reassuring. But she threads her anxieties with a resonant confidence that love, as unpredictable as it is, remains a risk worth investing in, the Joni-like spirit in her vocals undimmed. *LS*

38

Bad Bunny – Un Verano Sin Ti

The year's most streamed album is an old-fashioned romantic epic. Un Verano Sin Ti's achingly wistful tale of hedonism and heartbreak has a booze-soaked, tearstained mood; it feels tangentially indebted to classic literature (I hear the Bad Bunny of Un Verano Sin Ti, constantly jerking between the heat of partying and ice-cold alienation, as a perverse analogue to Neddy Merrill, from Cheever's The Swimmer) as well as cinematic worldbuilding breakup albums such as Lorde's Melodrama. Bad Bunny pairs his heartbroken missives with sublime reggaeton, dembow and bachata, as well as surprising moments of softness courtesy of indie artists such as the Marías, Buscabulla and Bomba Estéreo. He flits effortlessly between raucous party-starting and moments of wounded introversion, distilling all the divine drama of summer into 81 intoxicating, all-too-short minutes. *SD*

37

Wu-Lu – Loggerhead

Loggerhead is a little like a zombie movie where Wu-Lu is the lone survivor, a muffled voice of humanity trying to make out any remnants of life in an environment that no longer feels familiar. He stalks the album's diffuse post-punk landscapes, alternately yelling and mumbling, singing and rapping, letting out a harsh, piercing scream during South, the record's centrepiece. The closest comparison for this remarkable, haunted debut album would perhaps be enigmatic London experimentalist Dean Blunt, but where Blunt's main mode is detachment, Wu-Lu seeks out the visceral and the guttural, making an indelible impression in the process. *SD*

36

Sharon Van Etten – We've Been Going About This All Wrong

At the dawn of the 2020s, Sharon Van Etten, like so many others, began to feel the natural world revolt. Her sixth album is her response – not a raging polemic, but an attempt to answer the question she asks on Darkish: "Where will we be when our world is done?" Over a thunder of synths and guitars, she writes love songs to her child and partner, attempts to make peace with her anxieties about motherhood, sex and self-image. As the album crescendos with the magnificent Mistakes, she unleashes a torrent of intermingled pain and joy: "Even when I make a mistake / It's much better than that!" *SD*

35

Björk – Fossora

If Björk's last album, 2017's Utopia, was about an idealised version of life, she told us in August, then Fossora represented the real world: "Let's see what it's like when you walk into this fantasy and, you know, have a lunch and *farrrrt* and do normal things, like meet your friends." Naturally, Björk's musical rendering of domestic life didn't hold much truck with verité depictions of daily life. Instead, she twisted an artillery of bass clarinets, gabber beats and that famously abundant vocal range into a typically idiosyncratic vision of community inspired by mushrooms and matrilineage. *LS*

34

Charlotte Adigéry and Bolis Pupul – Topical Dancer

In a world of rigid thinking and hard borders between countries and sounds, the Belgium-based duo make their lunge towards freedom. "Thank yourself / Praise your body / Celebrate and dance," they urge. Liberation can be found in the body, they suggest – in reclaimed sexuality, a clear mind and a deep belly laugh – and they supply the tools to help get us there: the funk, the slink and a reminder of the pleasures of not taking life too seriously. *LS*

33

Oren Ambarchi / Johan Berthling / Andreas Werliin – Ghosted

In another typically prolific year for Oren Ambarchi, the Australian guitarist picked up the baton with some of his most enduring collaborators, the Swedes double bassist Johan Berthling and drummer Andreas Werliin. Ghosted is a hypnotic exploration of groove that seems to strip back over the course of its four already impressively lean songs: I is busy and curious; II shudders and flickers over a single repeated fretboard harmonic refrain. The eerie, pattering III starts leading the trio into the shadows before IV slips into the realm of hushed doom jazz plied by Bohren und der Club of Gore. As good an entry point as any into a rich catalogue (try Ambarchi's glorious 2022 solo album Shebang, for one). *LS*

32

Yaya Bey – Remember Your North Star

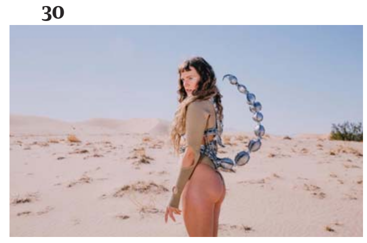
Yaya Bey's superlative second record is one of the year's coolest, a heady mix of R&B and jazz that's lived-in, conversational, meticulous; acidic in its humour and boundless in its empathy. Songs such as Keisha and Meet Me in Brooklyn are filled with subtle interlocking parts but never feel busy: the production equivalent of no-makeup makeup, they provide perfectly minimal backing for Bey to unspool her lackadaisical but painstakingly composed lyrics about relationships, work and Black womanhood. Recalling incisive, free-spirited chroniclers of sex and romance such as SZA and Cookie Mueller, Bey provides a much-needed voice for 21st-century singles everywhere, getting lost in love and looking good doing it. *SD*

31

Pusha T – It's Almost Dry

Four years after his career-rejuvenating instant classic Daytona, Pusha T returned with It's Almost Dry, arguably his sharpest and most appealingly persnickety album since his peak Clipse days. Unlike on Daytona, there's no Drake beef here to draw Push's ire; instead, his lyrics are all about petty rifts and decades-old dramas, scores that can only be settled with excoriating, ice-cold wordplay. While the credits list seems bloated – It's Almost Dry is stacked with household names including Kanye West, Jay-Z, Pharrell, Kid Cudi and Lil Uzi Vert, and features a Beyoncé sample on grandiose highlight Rock n Roll – the focus is squarely on Pusha, as, nearly 20 years on from his first commercial peak, he re-establishes himself as one of the era's most vital rappers. *SD*

30



▲ *Striking … Tove Lo. Photograph: Moni Haworth*

Muna – Muna

After getting dropped by their major label, the LA trio signed to Phoebe Bridgers' imprint of indie Secretly Canadian and made their poppiest album yet. Their collaboration with the boss, Silk Chiffon, is the purest hit on the record, a breathless, uncomplicated gasp of adoration in the direction of some perfect girl. But Muna's eye for complicated – and often unflattering – relationship dynamics still seethes beneath the album's gleaming pop structures, Y2K aesthetics and quasi-Taylor Swift hooks as singer Katie Gavin wrestles with post-breakup regret. *LS*

29

Let's Eat Grandma – Two Ribbons

Since they arrived six years ago, the Norwich duo have never been anything less than unique, moving from the insular teen lore of their 2016 debut I, Gemini to neon-bright proto-hyperpop on 2018's I'm All Ears. Two Ribbons is their third landmark record in a row: a viscerally brave contemplation of loss, as Jenny Hollingworth faced the death of her boyfriend from cancer, and she and Rosa Walton found themselves helplessly drifting apart, bridged via ravey euphoria, startling honesty and an intriguing newfound foray into ambience. *LS*

28

Jenny Hval – Classic Objects

After spending her whole career interrogating the norms and systems that bind us, the Norwegian songwriter turned her focus inwards to work out whether her own beliefs still served her and where they had come from in the first place. As with so many

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records released this year, she found a possible future guiding light in remaining open to possibility, a spirit she conveyed in her most plainly beautiful and openhearted music to date: lilting reggae, light-headed euphoria and sparkling choruses. *LS*

27
Gabriels – Angels & Queens – Part 1

In a sea of soul revivalists, Gabriels are the rare group actually pushing the genre forward. Their adventurous arrangements swap feelgood retro stylings for confrontational mosaics of samples, and moments where they pull the rug out from under the listener. Rather than dial up the volume or slather on the horns, as their less imaginative peers might, they use painstaking attention to detail as a way of heightening the drama. Equally shapeshifting is frontman Jacob Lusk, who can do diva, Nina and gut-wrenching balladeer at the light of the touchpaper: just listen to how he tastes the danger and deliciousness in the word "taboo" in a song of the same name. *LS*

26
The 1975 – Being Funny in a Foreign Language

No thoughts, head empty, only 1975 lyrics: "John's obsessed with fat ass and he's 10 years old"; "I know some vaccinista tote bag chic baristas"; "It seems that I was gaslighting you / I didn't know that it had its own word." Matty Healy, George Daniel and co get a lot of flak for being smartasses, but nearly every line on Being Funny in a Foreign Language is stupidly funny and devastatingly humane, some lovelorn-but-irony-poisoned phrase that probably should have been a tweet but, instead, is one of the most curiously insightful lyrics of the year. They pair those lyrics with production that's gleefully wonky but deeply reverential of the canon at the same time – DJ Sabrina the Teenage DJ loops, radiant R&B keys, a wall of sound that sounds like Heroes slowed to a crawl. This feels like a calling card record for the 1975 – their most delicate balance between romantic and ridiculous yet. *SD*

25
Alvvays – Blue Rev

The current sound of indie sophistication is all smooth, dulled surfaces and painfully wrought minimalism. Alvvays buck the trend with Blue Rev, an album that's impossibly busy but devastatingly elegant – the musical equivalent of a rich, quiet aunt who always seems to be wearing a few too many pieces of jewellery. Guitar solos unspool into more solos; Molly Rankin's lyrics are the stuff of acerbic, cult-favourite chapbooks, filled with "benevolent collegiates", defiant spinsters and references to cult heroes and iconic pop stars. As on earlier records, Alvvays are still channelling bookish indie icons such as Swirlies, the Smiths and Teenage Fanclub. But Blue Rev goes beyond pure influence, turning that sound into something grand, buffeting and rich, leaving in all the craters of distortion – the equivalent of taking your teenage cassette player and blasting it through the speakers of Wembley Stadium. *SD*

24
Big Thief – Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You

While Big Thief themselves can get a little tiresome – coming out with things like "we're one big organism", "it felt like we were inside a giant guitar", or whatever – their music remains a tonic to the head-in-the-clouds discourse. Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You charts strange, invigoratingly experimental new plains: a hoedown powered by cartoonish jew's harp, a noxious trip-hop dirge, and one song, Little Things, whose percussive guitar almost sounds like drawing pins being poured from one box to another. As ever, Adrianne Lenker's lyrics are startlingly clarified in their mix of the pedestrian and poetic ("I wanna be the wrinkle in your eye / I wanna be the vapour that gets you high") and the same could be said of the music itself: Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe In You is transgressive, challenging, and a perfect comfort listen. *SD*

23
Ethel Cain – Preacher's Daughter

Over 75 gruelling minutes, Hayden Anhedönia charts out the life of her Ethel Cain persona – a story of sexual abuse and slavery, absentee boyfriends, abduction and, in the album's final tracks, untimely death. It's a hazy, psychedelic southern gothic bildungsroman that's excruciatingly slow, musically and conceptually confronting, and meticulous in its worldbuilding. Cain couldn't have conceived of a more striking introduction – a star-making debut that revels in its own alienation. *SD*

22
Cate Le Bon – Pompeii

Pompeii is a tango with fear and suffering – Cate Le Bon's attempt to reckon with her anxieties about the state of the world without letting go of the sinewy grooves that have worked their way to the heart of her opalescent post-punk. Its lyrics are drawn from ancient tales, essays on architecture, diary entries, sharply contrasting modernist elan with stark confessional – a rarity for a Cate Le Bon album. Much like its grimy sax and off-kilter rhythms, most of Pompeii's questions lie unanswered long after the album is over. We're left with an image of Le Bon, dancing amid the rubble of civilisation: "Raise a glass in a season of ash / And pour it over me." *SD*

21
Mitski – Laurel Hell

In psychology, arrival fallacy describes the feeling of fulfilling a goal and yet still feeling disappointed. These are the underpinnings of Mitski's sixth album, in which the Japanese American songwriter confronts the compromises her career has forced on her art and personhood – an album, no less, that she had no intention of making until she realised she still owed her label one more. These sound like inauspicious invitations to listen to Laurel Hell until you remember that – perhaps unfortunately for Mitski – her songwriting thrives amid this sort of conflict, between what we're meant to want and what we truly want. Set primarily to the kind of tarnished 80s synth-pop the Weeknd would also explore on Dawn FM, Mitski charts the captivating battle between her weariness and drive, her rage and her discipline. *LS*

20
Soul Glo – Diaspora Problems

Diaspora Problems is sad, funny and, above all, brutal – the sound of a band contending with the horrors of racism and capitalism with an absurdist grin and an uncompromising eye. Fusing raw, flayed hardcore with dense rap, meme-ish humour, horn sections and jagged samples, Soul Glo reorient punk towards its anarchic and anti-capitalist roots, away from the When We Were Young-ified TikTok punk aesthetic and towards something that – in a rarity for 2022 – felt genuinely vital and transgressive. *SD*

19
Dry Cleaning – Stumpwork

An air of unease haunts the south London band's second album: the guitars are dank and sludgy, the rhythm section proceeds at a suspicious pace, pockets of ambience linger unsettlingly. And yet, Stumpwork is even more captivating than the more rollicking New Long Leg because it demands we pay closer attention. In Florence Shaw's inimitable lyrics, she nudges towards intimacy and flinches at mistrust, and her expressions of inferiority and fear pierce with a strange, ineffable sort of sadness. But the prevailing disquiet also makes Stumpwork's fleeting moments of joy and humour all the more gratifying: "Things are shit but they're gonna be OK," Shaw sings on Kwenchy Kups. "And I'm gonna see the otters." *LS*

18
Steve Lacy – Gemini Rights

After the release of his watery debut album Apollo XXI, it felt as if any goodwill towards Steve Lacy – accrued thanks to the promise of his sleeper hit debut EP Steve Lacy's Demo, his work on Kendrick Lamar's Damn, and the showstopping charisma he displayed as a member of the Internet – had burnt up as fast as it had arrived. Then he released Gemini Rights: an electrifyingly bitchy breakup album that's sad and viciously horny one moment, nihilistic and cartoonishly forlorn the next. The perfect expression of Lacy's indie-meets-R&B-meets-funk style – the kind of genrelessness that genuinely feels invigorating and intentional, not just mushy – Gemini Rights is fuelled by contradiction, detailing Lacy's hedonistic pursuit of women after having his heart broken by a man and mashing his ostentatious, peacock-y musical sensibility (and fashion sense) with the shyness of all the best shoegazers. Smutty, candid and strange, it was the year's most pleasantly surprising breakthrough. *SD*

17
Taylor Swift – Midnights

Of all the reflective projects Taylor Swift has embarked upon recently – rerecording her first six albums to reclaim ownership over them; two sepia-tinted lockdown releases – her tenth studio album was the most revealing. Midnights revisits 13 sleepless nights from across her life, her mature perspective casting new light on stories we thought we knew: the toll of success as a young woman and of relationships that look exploitative in hindsight; how she has chafed against expectations of femininity; the self-loathing underpinnings of her public persona. Fittingly, its sound put a moody, sophisticated filter on the pop that made her name while still serving up crowdpleasers. It felt like Swift finally shaking off the ingenue, and hopefully lays the groundwork for her to strike forward and process her present with this level of acuity on whatever comes next. *LS*

16
Yeah Yeah Yeahs – Cool It Down

At their historic best, Yeah Yeah Yeahs have made music for cramped spaces: basements they can strain against and blow the roof off. But their fifth album, and first in nine years, is proper big-sky music, full of cavernous, lovingly patient songs made for staring at the stars and pondering your place among them. Karen O is at her most intimate and open-hearted here as she weighs up the balance between futility and optimism, comfort and the wild, in strikingly elemental and intuitive lyricism; meanwhile Nick Zinner, Brian Chase and O's still-sharp punk teeth gnash at the edges of the magnificent vistas they conjure. *LS*

15
FKA twigs – Caprisongs

Before this year, it was well established that FKA twigs could do pretty much anything – sing, write, produce, pole dance, sword fight – but until the release of Caprisongs, one question lingered: could she make party records? Caprisongs showed that the answer was an unequivocal, neon-lit yes. Humid, rhythmic and alive, it slips between distended dance tracks ranging from hyperpop to reggae to afrobeats, and serene, moonlit balladry. It feels like a summer night that stretches until dawn, constantly drifting from the party to the street to an overstuffed Uber. After the alien soundscapes of Magdalene, Caprisongs brings twigs down to earth, crying and laughing and dancing like the rest of us. *SD*

14
Sudan Archives – Natural Brown Prom Queen

"I'm a home maker," Brittney Parks sings on the opening track of her second album proper. "Only bad bitches in my trellis / And baby I'm the baddest." It's both an invitation to her space and a gauntlet thrown to see if listeners can keep up with her across Natural Brown Prom Queen, which skips from looped strings (on Parks' primary instrument, the cello) to the club and stops off everywhere in between, sometimes within the scope of a single song. She's an R&B traditionalist and an experimental innovator, admirably cocksure and relatably insecure: a dazzling maximalist whose idea of home feels cosmos-like in scope. *LS*

13
Gilla Band – Most Normal

Pure, obliterating derangement is the order of the day in Gilla Band's third album, which turns rock inside out, feeds it through a post-Yeezus filter of pixilated howls and distortion, then transfuses it with a vital shot of humour and dread. Despite the Irish four-piece's taste for desecration, Most Normal retains a supremely addictive sense of pop integrity: it's filled with twisted earworms ("I can't wear hats I just get slagged!"), a kaleidoscopic wealth of texture, and dramatic climaxes as addictive as any Top 40 middle-eight. *LS*

12
Harry Styles – Harry's House

It's a tall order for a superstar to pull off an intimate record: it's a contradiction of scale, plus the more famous you are, the more fiercely guarded your privacy. On Styles' third album, he comes admirably close to landing the pitch. It isn't quite Paul McCartney's Ram, but there's a lived-in quality to Harry's House in the domestic settings, the unexplained snatches of dialogue between lovers and friends, and the sudden awareness of change as you see a shadow lengthen with the seasons. The music, too, seems to flick through Styles' own record collection: there's some flagrant Macca-isms there from a well-documented fan, as well as west coast bonhomie, big-ticket 80s pop and Laurel Canyon delicacy. *LS*

11
Shygirl – Nymph

The London producer's long-awaited debut brought a blast of fresh air to the filthy, dripping club tunes that she broke out with, putting Blane Muise front and centre of brighter productions (collaborations with Danny L Harle, Sega Bodega and Arca among others) that touched on UK garage, bloghouse and, on Little Bit, apparently the detritus of Y2K-era Timbaland. While Shygirl is never backwards in coming forward, her vulnerabilities also shone through here as she addressed a lover's treachery and admitted to her own. An impressively cohesive debut, though try telling her that: "I can have it all but I'm never satisfied," she flexes on Woe. *LS*

10
Nilüfer Yanya – Painless

What Painless lacks in immediacy it more than makes up for in directness, and the after effects linger long past its lean running time. This is a more muscular version of Yanya's sound, with more space and fewer adornments. She steps up to the challenge of having nowhere to hide, and there is a resolve here that gives the impression of an artist firmly and confidently finding her feet. It can be a painful listen at times, but its refusal to back down from the ugliness and complexity of raw emotions, particularly when it comes to love, is bracing and compulsive. Read more. *Rebecca Nicholson*

9
Fontaines DC – Skinty Fia

This year's Skinty Fia signalled the Irish band's most radical metamorphosis yet. There aren't too many signs left of the rabble-rousing punk of their debut; instead, the five-piece has become more reflective while also throwing in curveballs from Irish folk accordion to hints of drum'n'bass. Chiefly driven by considerable shifts in geography after the band left Dublin to set up home in London, the songs mostly address Ireland and Irishness from the viewpoint of the Irish diaspora abroad, acknowledging the band's desire to broaden their horizons while holding on to strong, if occasionally bittersweet, affection for their homeland. Digging into the disconnect between ordinary humans and societal structures, Fontaines DC make unusual subjects seem universal, and like the Smiths or the Pogues, they know that you can address all manner of uncomfortable topics – from the Tuam care home abuses to toxic relationships – if the tunes are strong enough. Read more. *Dave Simpson*

8
Wet Leg – Wet Leg

On one level, Wet Leg's rollicking debut album is an autopsy of a past relationship conducted with goofiness, with Rhian Teasdale often sounding openly disgusted by men before spraying a squirty-cream smiley face over that judgment. But she and Hester Chambers pair sweet with sour to disarm, then pull you in close and whisper the real story in your ear. It's also an album about middle-class millennial malaise – though they always temper worry with something lighthearted: their gags and the sing-a-long choruses hint at an attitude so throwaway it's almost absurdist. But look beyond the smirk and there's skill, observational wit and melodies that burrow into your brain. Read more. *Tshepo Mokoena*

7
Jockstrap – I Love You Jennifer B

On their debut album, Georgia Ellery and Taylor Skye pan for nuggets of sound that have never been put together before. Everything that makes a noise is fair game as they plunder every genre for a possible production style here, a unique chord progression there. I Love You Jennifer B should sound like a nightmare – and sometimes it does –

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but there's a current of fun that holds it all together: the cartoonish chopping and reassembling of vocals reminds you that this album is not as po-faced or art school as it might sound on paper. Read more. *Kate Solomon*

Henry Cavill dropped as Superman weeks after announcing return to role

Sian Cain



▲ *Henry Cavill as Superman in Man of Steel. Cavill has been told he won't reprise the role in Guardians of the Galaxy director James Gunn's film. Photograph: Clay Enos*

Guardians of the Galaxy director and DC Studios' new co-chairman, James Gunn, is writing a Superman movie that won't involve the actor Henry Cavill, who said it was "not the easiest news" after he only recently announced that he would be returning to the role.

The new Superman film penned by Gunn will take the character in a different direction and focus on the superhero's younger years. The announcement comes amid momentous change at DC Studios and parent company Warner Brothers, which has been slashing scores of projects to cut costs after merging with Discovery, Inc.

Cavill has played Superman since the 2013 film Man of Steel and last appeared in the role in a cameo in Black Adam earlier this year. In October, after resigning from the lead role in Netflix show The Witcher, he announced he would be returning to play Superman again.

On Wednesday, Cavill wrote on Instagram that Gunn and his co-chair, Peter Safran, had met with him to deliver the news.

"I will, after all, not be returning as Superman," Cavill wrote. "After being told by the studio to announce my return back in October, prior to their hire, this news isn't the easiest, but that's life. The changing of the guard is something that happens. I respect that. James and Peter have a universe to build. I wish them and all involved with the new universe the best of luck, and the happiest of fortunes."

Fans might want to "mourn for a bit", he wrote, but "Superman is still around".

"My turn to wear the cape has passed, but what Superman stands for never will. It's been a fun ride with you all, onwards and upwards."

Gunn's film will reportedly focus on the younger years of the hero, during his years posing as Daily Planet reporter Clark Kent, with insiders telling the Hollywood Reporter that Gunn could potentially direct the film as well as writing it.

"Peter & I have a DC slate ready to go, which we couldn't be more over-the-moon about; we'll be able to share some exciting information about our first projects at the beginning of the new year," Gunn wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. "Among those on the slate is Superman. In the initial stages, our story will be focusing on an earlier part of Superman's life, so the character will not be played by Henry Cavill. But we just had a great meeting with Henry and we're big fans and we talked about a number of exciting possibilities to work together in the future."

Cavill's announcement that he would return as Superman was reportedly signed off by Warner Bros, before Gunn and Safran assumed their roles at DC Studios on 1 November. Just six days before that, Cavill had said in an interview that he was looking forward to playing an "enormously joyful" Superman and that he was "very excited" about Gunn being hired.

On Tuesday it was revealed that DC Studios' Wonder Woman director Patty Jenkins would no longer be working on a third film in the franchise. In response to reports, she denied quitting, writing in a lengthy open letter: "I never walked away. I was open to considering anything asked of me. It was my understanding there was nothing I could do to move anything forward at this time."

The Hollywood Reporter claims that Gunn and Safran have also met with Batman actor Ben Affleck to float the idea of him directing for them in the future.

A Black Superman film written by author Ta-Nehisi Coates and produced by JJ Abrams is reportedly still going ahead, and will not be impacted by Gunn's film.

Gunn has long been in the running to make a Superman film: in 2018, when Gunn left Marvel Studios for DC when he was temporarily fired from Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3, then-Warners boss Toby Emmerich pushed for Gunn to take on Superman. Gunn wrote and directed The Suicide Squad instead.

Olivia Newton-John remembered by Didi Conn

The first time I met Olivia Newton-John was on the set of *Grease* in 1977. She arrived in this white T-Bird convertible with the top down. It was gorgeous, and she was gorgeous. With stars, you tend to keep a distance until you feel that the time is right, so we didn't talk too much at first, except that she told me how cute she thought John Travolta was.

When we did our first day of shooting together, she was very nervous, so being the veteran film actress I was (I only did two movies before that one) I began to improvise with her as [my character] Frenchy. I'm going: "Oh, Sandy. I'm so happy you're my neighbour and we can come to school together!", and she's looking at me like, is this in the script? But then she caught on and we had so much fun. I said: "What was it like going to school in Australia?" She said: "Oh my God. I had to wear gloves, and the boys went in one place and girls went in another." And before we knew it, Randal [Kleiser], our director, was saying "Action". She hugged and kissed me afterwards and said "thank you, thank you!" for helping to break the ice.



▲ *Olivia Newton-John in 1978. Photograph: Walt Disney Television Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content/Getty Images*

That was the beginning of a deeper friendship. I happened to live just down the road from her in Malibu, so we spent a lot of time together. We went horseback riding up at her place. Travolta came up there and we talked about acting teachers – he didn't believe in acting teachers. She gave me little biscuits with tea. I'd never had them before. From then on, I'd always get those Leibniz biscuits with milk chocolate on top.

When we first met, she was a rock star with No 1s and TV specials. She was very career-driven. But when she first got diagnosed with cancer [in 1992], she had [her daughter] Chloe, and Chloe was very young. In that moment, she made a decision that she was going to get better, which she did. Her priorities changed. She became a good friend, she really was there for Chloe and it was so important for her to share with the world what she went through and how she beat it – not only surviving cancer, but thriving.

She raised millions for the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Wellness and Research Centre in Melbourne. One of the things she did was a 21-day hike on the Great Wall of China. Each walker was sponsored and I don't know how many millions that brought in. I went for eight days and I remember Olivia found a little lost kitten, which she called Magic. It was so small and she kept it right next to her chest, in her sports bra, the whole time. She had a terrible cold, but she wasn't thinking of herself, she was always thinking of what she could do for others.

Her character in *Grease* starts off as this goody-goody-two-shoes, and that was Olivia's reputation too. Well, there was a hot momma smouldering underneath that beautiful exterior. We were doing the scene at the drive-in and, at one point, this very gorgeous, sexy woman with big hair and high red shoes comes walking between the cars. Nobody recognised her at first. Then we realised it was Olivia. Everybody went crazy and said they just couldn't believe it. And the guys, their tongues were hanging out, they were drooling.



▲ *Olivia Newton-John and Didi Conn in Grease. Photograph: Paramount Pictures/Allstar*

In later years, I went to see her perform all over. It was great because I got to be a rock star for five minutes. During her *Grease* segment, she would say: "Some of us have made friends that have lasted 40 years, and I have a friend like that. Didi, are you there?" I'd be sitting in the middle and I'd say: "Yeah I am!" And the people would go berserko. Everybody'd be screaming and screaming. I'd come on stage and say to the audience: "Isn't she the most beautiful person you've ever seen in your life?" And we would do Summer Nights together. Of course, I would never remember the lyrics, but it didn't

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matter. It was so much fun.

She would always send me beautiful orchids on my birthday. This year I got very sick and was in the hospital for two months. When I got home I called her and she said: "I heard from so-and-so you were sick. Why didn't you tell me?" The next day, I got beautiful orchids from her. Well, the day before she died, one of those orchid buds fell down, and I just had a feeling that that meant something. Then sure enough I got the call that she had gone.

In *Grease*, Frenchy wants Sandy to be a Pink Lady, and Rizzo says: "She looks too pure to be pink." And that purity, that sweetness, that beauty, I saw that the very first moment I met her. That was the story of our friendship: pure heart, pure love.

Best films of 2022 in the UK: No 7 – RRR

Steve Rose

Sometimes, quantity can be quality. This bracing Indian epic is told in such massive strokes, it made every other action movie this year look timid and unambitious. Where else could you find an anticolonialist dance number, a prison breakout involving a man wielding two rifles while being carried on his friend's shoulders, or a hero ambushing his enemies' palace by crashing a truck through the gates and leaping out the back, a flaming torch in each hand, alongside a menagerie of tigers, leopards and other wild animals – in slow motion? The movie is jam-packed with surreally bonkers yet brilliantly orchestrated moments like this, and it's an utter joy.



▲ *A smash hit … NT Rama Rao Jr as Komaram Bheem in RRR*

Nothing about RRR is small: the size of the crowd scenes, the scale of the battles, the sadistic villainy of the British, the three-hour running time. It was the most expensive Indian movie ever made (an estimated $72m) and it shows. The story is set in the 1920s, during the British Raj, and parallels the journeys of two men who are opposed politically, yet similar in their unbreakable determination and superheroic athleticism. One is Komaram Bheem (NT Rama Rao Jr), who goes to Delhi in search of a girl stolen from his village by the British. The other is Alluri Sitarama Raju (Ram Charan), an Indian Imperial Police officer who is determined to rise to the top – by finding Bheem. In their dual quests, both men assume secret identities and – irony of ironies – they become best buddies! But the bromance is destined not to last.

The plot has more reversals than a Liz Truss government but above all, RRR is about the action. There are on-foot chases, fist fights, crowd fights, gunfights, bow-and-arrow fights, tiger fights … you name it. Granted, it plays to its own laws of physics and probability, and director SS Rajamouli makes liberal and blatant use of CGI, but fortunately he has a keen sense of style, choreography, spatial clarity and narrative pur-



▲ *Brief bromance … Ram Charan and NT Rama Rao Jr in RRR. Photograph: AP*

pose, and it all comes together into moments of such ludicrous, air-punching brilliance, your critical defences are useless against it.

A smash hit in India, RRR gained a substantial cinema release in the US, and has earned praise from western film-makers such as JJ Abrams, the Russo brothers, James Gunn and Edgar Wright. Now on Netflix, it has found the global audience it fully deserves.

'Post-Avatar depression syndrome': why do fans feel blue after watching James Cameron's film?

Sian Cain explains it to Steph Harmon

Sian, I just read a headline about something called "post-Avatar depression". It sounds like exactly what happens to me whenever I watch a deeply derided big budget and fairly nonsensical film – but I get the feeling this is … something else.

It all began after the first Avatar was released in 2009: people started posting on a fan site, Avatar Forums, that they were feeling down and unsatisfied with their lives after seeing James Cameron's film, about humanity's attempt to colonise a pristine planet called Pandora, home to the Na'vi, a blue humanoid race. Humanity seemed out of step with the natural world, they felt, especially when compared to the spiritual, environment-loving Na'vi.

PDF NEWSPAPERS and MAGAZINES: WWW.XSAVA.XYZ



▲ *'Maybe Avatar: The Way of Water might provoke a burst of ocean-saving activism.' Photograph: 20th Century Studios/Disney/PA*

"Ever since I went to see Avatar I have been depressed. Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na'vi made me want to be one of them," one wrote. "I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora and the everything is the same as in Avatar." Another asked: "Are there other people out there who think humanity is going south?"

The thread received more than 1,000 posts from people around the world experiencing similar feelings; it became so popular that a second thread was created for more room, and the discussion spread to other fan sites. It was picked up by the media in 2010, and eventually labelled post-Avatar depression syndrome (PADS).

Wait, what do you mean "labelled"? This isn't a DSM-level diagnosis is it?

The most important thing is that the feelings people experience are very real, and often very troubling to them. But no, PADS is not a medically recognised condition – nor does it seem to be a PR campaign. It is an observable phenomenon.

It seems that Avatar does uniquely provoke similar feelings among disparate people, but the feelings it provokes – sorrow from feeling disconnected from nature, worries about the future of our own planet and feeling dissatisfied with modern life – are all very normal feelings to have given how we have built our world and societies. And it's of note that many of the original posters on those forums were young men, who would also write about feeling lonely at school, or unsupported at home.

"It has taken the best of our technology to create this virtual world, and real life will never be as utopian as it seems onscreen. It makes real life seem more imperfect," Dr Stephan Quentzel, a New York psychiatrist, told CNN in 2010 as way of explanation.

Interestingly, PADS was not confined to when the film came out; individuals have spoken about watching Avatar for the first time in the years since it was released and still reported having similar feelings. One fan recently estimated that 10-20% of people using Avatar fan forums report experiencing it.

Is there a cure?

Ancient Forest Alliance, a Canadian non-profit dedicated to the protection of old-growth forests, developed a three-step cure for PADS: "Get out and experience nature, take action to defend nature and get others to do the same."

Fans also began sharing tips on ways to reduce consumerism and waste, and how to engage more with the natural world. One Swedish fan, Ivar Hill, wrote on the forum when he was 17: "When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed … gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning. It just seems so … meaningless. I still don't really see any reason to keep … doing things at all. I live in a dying world." But after speaking to fans, he began reading philosophy and spending more time out in nature by hiking. "Avatar made me feel like I could sit out in a forest and just be," Hill told the New York Times last month; he's now in his 30s and married to a woman he met on an Avatar fan forum he started.

And, as is often the case in fandoms, there is a touching comradery to be found. In a 2021 episode of the documentary series How To with John Wilson, he sits down with a group for Avatar fans who began meeting up in 2020. Some of their meeting is just nerds nerding, but a lot of it is them talking about their struggles with depression and how they've found solace in each other.

"For me the post-Avatar depression hit hard because I have this serial track record of trying to escape my reality," one says, tearfully recalling how a fellow Avatar fan saved his life after he posted on a forum about feeling suicidal. "Ultimately it comes from a desire to want something better," he muses, of PADs. "But just because we have that desire, I think it drives us to make the world that we live in a better place."

Finding your people is a cure for all ills.

The sequel, Avatar: The Way of Water, is finally out. How's everybody doing?

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Some are obviously, very excited. But superfanHill told the New York Times these days, it is just another movie for him: "It's going to be really interesting to see, but it's not like I'm counting down the days."

It seems that even for the big fans, it's a bit weird having a sequel out for a 13-year-old film described as "the most popular film that no one remembers". But who knows – maybe Avatar: The Way of Water might provoke a burst of ocean-saving activism.

● *Crisis support services can be reached 24 hours a day: Lifeline 13 11 14; Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467; Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800; MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78; Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636*

'Firmageddon': Oregon conifers suffer record die-off as climate crisis hits hard

Gabrielle Canon

Scientists have discovered a record number of dead fir trees in Oregon, in a foreboding sign of how drought and the climate crisis are ravaging the American west.

A recent aerial survey found that more than a million acres of forest contain trees that have succumbed to stressors exacerbated by a multiyear drought. Images released by the US Forest Service show Oregon's lush green expanses dotted with ominous swathes of red.



▲ *Ominous swaths of red dot Oregon's green expanses where the fir trees have died. Photograph: Danny DePinte/US Forest Service*

"It is stunning," said Daniel DePinte, an aerial survey program manager with the Forest Service who led the agency's Pacific north-west region aerial survey, noting that this year saw the highest mortality rate for firs in this area in history. These evergreen conifers are less able to survive in drought conditions than other heartier trees that line the landscapes.

He and his colleagues scanned the slopes from planes several times between June and October, detailing the devastation on digital maps. During that time, it became clear that this year would be unlike anything he had seen before. The data, first reported by the environmental journalism nonprofit Columbia Insight, is still being finalized but dead trees were spotted in areas across 1.1m acres of Oregon forest. The scientists have taken to dubbing it "firmageddon".

"The size of this is enormous," DePinte said. "A lot of people out there think climate change is just impacting the ice caps or some low-level island out there but it is actually impacting right here in our backyard," he added. "If this drought continues as climate change keeps on, and we continue ignoring what nature is showing us across the globe – it doesn't bode well at all."

An ongoing drought, paired with recent extreme heat, has left more vulnerable trees like firs struggling to adapt. As the cascading effects of the climate crisis unfold, ecosystems are expected to shift. The loss of these trees are a sign that the forests may already be starting to change.

"It will be a different forest with a different feel and it will happen across the landscape as nature decides," DePinte said. "Nature is saying there is just not enough to support the firs, and they will overtime be eliminated from those areas."

Scientists have expected to see signs of stress in the forests, but the suddenness of the spike in mortality was alarming. Before this year, the largest area where dead trees was recorded in Oregon was in 1952 where die-offs were spotted across roughly 550,000 acres.

"This is not surprising that this is happening, but to see such a peak within the span of a year – that is concerning," said Christine Buhl, a forest entomologist with the Oregon department of forestry. The underlying conditions that caused the spike – record-high temperatures and record-low precipitation – had a compounding effect on the forest because of timing, duration and frequency.

"Hot drought is a double whammy for a tree," she said, explaining that the roots of drought-stressed trees die back, making it harder for them to recover even when water is available. Prolonged lack of moisture, especially during growing seasons when precipitation was once more plentiful, also harms a tree's vascular tissues that are used by the tree to draw in water.

"It is kind of like if you are trying to suck up a milkshake with a straw but there is a hole in the straw," Buhl explained.

Rebuilding those essential tissues takes time and also requires resources. When conditions continue for longer stretches of time, some trees aren't able to cope. Stressed trees are also more susceptible to other aggressors, including insect infestations and disease. "Sometimes you will see trees dying years after a major drought stress," she said, "because they have just been trying to hang on".

The loss of these trees can change other ecosystems in the forest. The flood of warmth and light once guarded by a thick canopy can increase stream temperatures or make space for invasive species once kept out by shade. Some species will thrive in the shift. Bees that nest in the forest floor, Buhl said, benefit from the burst in sunlight that also helps flowering plants blossom. But others will perish.

The effects aren't limited to Oregon, and scientists have observed a similar – if far less severe – die-offs of firs in Washington state, although fewer of these types of trees grow there.

The tree deaths also heighten other risks, such as wildfires. "Long periods of drought and extreme heat can make trees weaker and more susceptible to things like insects and disease outbreaks," said Will Rubin, a spokesperson with the Washington department of natural resources. "That overcrowded dry, dead, timber, becomes more susceptible to fueling those fast-moving higher heat intensity wildfires that blanket the west in smoke."



▲ *The loss of trees is a sign that forest ecosystems are starting to change. Photograph: Danny DePinte/US Forest Service*

As heatwaves and drought conditions deepen across the American west, landscape managers are looking at ways to adapt and to increase the resiliency of forests, including through proven treatments such as prescribed burning that helps the land heal and protects against catastrophic fires.

"We are trying to help return our forests to this a historically resilient state, while managing for and understanding the impacts of these severe weather events as climate science shows they are more likely to happen more often," Rubin said.

When it comes to die-off, researchers are trying to embrace the shift. Dying firs may not be replanted. "We have to get used to it. We are not going to see some species in the same places we expected to in the past," Buhl said. She emphasizes that understanding where the climate will be in the decades to come can help them get ahead of problems. "If we can prepare and know that there is going to be a shift in the way things look," she said, "we are going to be way better off".

Plastic 'nurdles' stop sea urchins developing properly, study finds

Karen McVeigh

Sea urchins raised in sea water with high levels of plastic pollution, including fragments collected from a Cornish surfing beach, die from developmental abnormalities, research shows.



▲ *Purple sea urchins. The larvae in the study showed 'developmental abnormalities including malformation of the skeleton, neural and immune cells'. Photograph: Scott Groth/AP*

Scientists placed fertilised urchin eggs in seawater with varying levels of plastic to compare the effects of newly made plastic pellets, or "nurdles", with the impacts of high levels of fragments found washed up on Watergate Bay in Cornwall.

They found that the sea urchin larvae that were raised in water contaminated by pellets bought from a plastic manufacturer developed significant abnormalities at all three concentrations tested (1, 5 and 10% of plastic). Those raised in water contaminated by nurdles collected from the surfing beach also died, but only at the highest concentrations of 10%.

This suggests that newly made plastic, which still contains high levels of additives that leach out into the water, are more harmful, researchers say. Although the concentrations of plastic tested in the study are rare in the ocean, they say, the lowest concentrations, of about 1%, could occur during spills.

The research team – from the Anton Dohrn Zoological Station and National Biodiversity Future Center in Italy, and the University of Exeter in the UK – previously found that plastic additives can harm sea urchin larvae and say the new study develops this and reveals how the harm is caused.

"The larvae affected by plastic pollution showed developmental abnormalities including malformation of the skeleton, neural and immune cells," said Dr Eva Jimenez-Guri, from the Anton Dohrn Zoological Station and the University of Exeter.

"They also showed 'radialisation' – meaning they lacked proper symmetrical structure, and were instead largely formless and therefore unable to survive.

"In these larvae, mitochondria (the 'powerhouses' of cells) didn't work properly, and they showed signs of oxidative stress, which damages cells."

"Even if plastic is not killing animals by ingestion or entanglement, it can also kill animals by the chemicals in it or on it," Jimenez-Guri said.

"Our findings point to clear and specific detrimental effects of marine plastic pollution on the development of sea urchin larvae," she said.

In the case of new PVC nurdles, the damage was caused by high concentrations of zinc that leached into the water. Larvae exposed to 10% PVC pollution developed their gut outside their body, while the 5% and 1% levels also led to fatal abnormalities.

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The beach-collected samples did not release high levels of zinc, as most of the additives they contained would already have been released in the sea.

However, from earlier research, the scientists determined that such particles were known to collect a variety of persistent organic pollutants.

The paper, published in the journal Science of the Total Environment, is entitled: "Plastic leachate-induced toxicity during sea urchin embryonic development: Insights into the molecular pathways affected by PVC."

The researchers, who have identified the genes affected by the pollutants, are already investigating whether nurdles could cause similar abnormalities in other species that reply on the same genes for key early stages of development.

China's return to wildlife farming 'a risk to global health and biodiversity'

Guardian staff

China appears to be weakening its post-Covid restrictions on the farming of wildlife such as porcupines, civets and bamboo rats, which raises a new risk to public health and biodiversity, warn NGOs and experts.

Before the pandemic, wildlife farming was promoted by government agencies as an easy way for rural Chinese people to get rich. But China issued an outright ban on hunting, trading and transporting wildlife, as well as the consumption as food, after public health experts suggested the virus could have originated from the supply chain.

Around 14 million people worked in the wildlife farming industry before the Covid restrictions, with the industry worth an estimated 520bn yuan (£60bn).

The ban covers almost 1,800 animals with important ecological, economic and social values – known as the "three values". This included hedgehogs, raccoon dogs, civets, wild boars, porcupines and bamboo rats. Yet the consumption of wildlife as food has been lying in a grey area, say experts, with authorities admitting that current regulations aren't clear enough.

Not long after the ban, wildlife breeding centres across China were ordered to shut, cutting off the primary source of income for millions of farmers. Yet farmers could still captively breed a smaller number of exempted animals on the banned list including silver foxes and raccoon dogs if they obtained a government-approved licence.



▲ Bamboo rats, such as this one on a farm in Congjiang County, Guizhou Province, are mainly farmed for their meat. Photograph: Hap/Quirky China News/REX/Shutterstock

While regulations do ban eating species from unlawful sources or under protection, they do not say whether the "eating of animals with the three values or other terrestrial wildlife not under a specific type of protection is legal or not. This creates a loophole," said Yang Heqing, a National People's Congress official.

A more recent update to the Wildlife Protection Law has now eased restrictions on the farming of wildlife, claim NGOs and experts. "Under the second draft, the farming of wildlife with the three values doesn't need to get approved. You just need to register. And if something goes wrong, you'll only need to rectify the problem within a given period of time," said a public statement from the Shan Shui Conservation Center, a Chinese NGO dedicated to species and ecosystem conservation.

"We worry that such changes will weaken the supervision and protection of animals with the three values, thus impacting wild populations," the statement added.

The more recent update has also removed the phrase "preventing public health risks", weakening the link between protecting wildlife and safeguarding public health, say NGOs.

"The best way to truly safeguard public health is to let wildlife stay where they are supposed to be, which is their natural habitat," said the Chinese wildlife conservation volunteer group Anti-Poaching Crime Squad in a statement on WeChat. "Any attempts to farm, breed, buy or sell and utilise them, especially by eating them, will only increase public health risks."

Categories exempted for captive breeding contain 16 kinds of animals, including a few varieties of chickens, ducks and deer, as well as silver foxes, raccoon dogs and minks. But the regulation changes have been viewed as newly created contexts for reviving the now-dormant wildlife business.

"It's highly likely that wildlife, especially species with the three values, will return to the public eye. It would certainly mean a temporary victory for supporters of the industry," Zhou Jinfeng, the secretary-general of China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, told the Guardian.

"Let's not forget that there have already been three major outbreaks caused by coronaviruses since the start of the 21st century: Sars, Mers and Covid. These outbreaks have been thought to be closely linked to wildlife. We should learn the lesson and introduce policies guiding workers in the industry to find alternatives," he added.

Song Wan, a former bamboo rat farmer from Hunan province, suffered huge losses from the abrupt ban on wildlife farming. Now he is ready to resume. "I still keep a small number of the rats. If wildlife farming does get allowed again, I will start raising more."



▲ Fox cubs at a farm Zhangjiakou, Hebei province, where they are bred for their fur. Photograph: Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images

Ran Jingcheng, a researcher at the College of Forestry at Guizhou University, has said he opposes consumption of wildlife as food and the poaching of endangered species, but that it is "unscientific to consider captively bred animals the same as those living in the wild".

Other experts disagree. "To be relaxing those regulations is outrageous," said Prof Diana Bell, a conservation biologist at the University of East Anglia. "They need to think really carefully about this because, from what we've learned in porcupine farms in Vietnam, many animals were actually obtained through the laundering of animals caught from the wild. Unless we can address that, such activities will present a major threat to biodiversity in Asia."

You can send us your stories and thoughts at animalsfarmed@theguardian.com

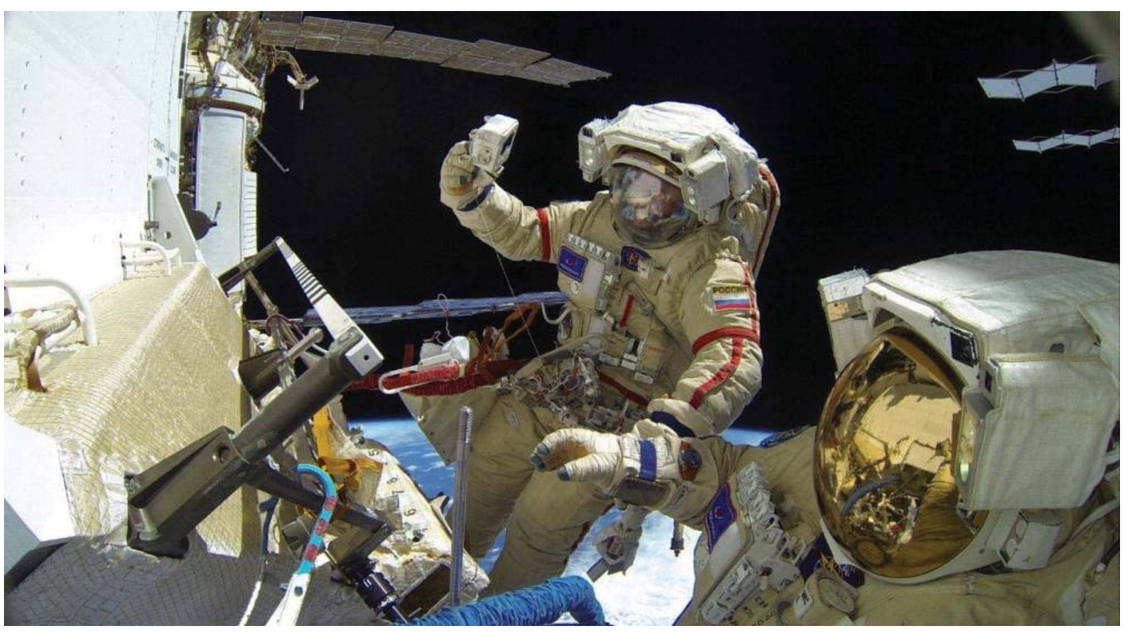
Meteoroid hit suspected after major leak from Soyuz capsule

Samantha Lock and Oliver Holmes

A major leak from a Russian capsule docked on the International Space Station was most probably caused when a small meteoroid smashed into a radiator, leading to coolant being sprayed into space, a Roscosmos official has said.

Sergei Krikalev, a former cosmonaut who is now director of crewed space flight programs at Russia's space corporation, said Thursday's leak from the Soyuz MS-22 could affect the capsule's overall coolant system but that there was "no threat for the crew" of the space station.

The leak had prompted a pair of cosmonauts to abort a planned spacewalk earlier in the day. It also raises concerns over the capsule's capability of returning safely to Earth next spring as planned with two cosmonauts and a Nasa astronaut, or whether an emergency replacement vehicle will have to be sent up.



▲ Roscosmos cosmonauts Sergey Prokopyev and Dimitri Petelin seen conducting a spacewalk in November 2022. Photograph: Roscosmos/Reuters

Micrometeoroids, naturally occurring pieces of rock or metal that can be as small as a grain of sand, pose a significant danger to human spaceflight. They hurl around the Earth at about 17,000mph (27,400km/h) – much faster than the speed of a bullet.

Human-made "space junk" can also damage equipment. Last year, Russia blew up one of its own satellites in a missile test that created clouds of zooming shrapnel.

On Thursday, a "visible stream of flakes" prompted Russian flight controllers to abort the spacewalk, a Nasa livestream showed.

"Tonight's spacewalk has been cancelled because of an observed leak of what is believed to be a cooling substance from the Soyuz MS-22," the Nasa commentator Rob Navias can be heard saying in a broadcast from Nasa's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

"We noticed a visible stream of flakes coming from the aft of the Soyuz near the instrumentation and propulsion module that was indicative of a leak," Navias added.

The mishap occurred just before two of the Roscosmos cosmonauts, crew commander Sergey Prokopyev and flight engineer Dimitri Petelin, suited up for a planned spacewalk to

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move a radiator from one module to another on the Russian segment of the ISS.

Earlier, an official for Russia's mission control operations near Moscow was heard telling the pair in a radio transmission that their spacewalk was being cancelled while engineers worked to determine the nature of the problem.

Nasa also said the ISS crew was not thought to be in any danger from the leak.

Reuters and the Associated Press contributed to this report

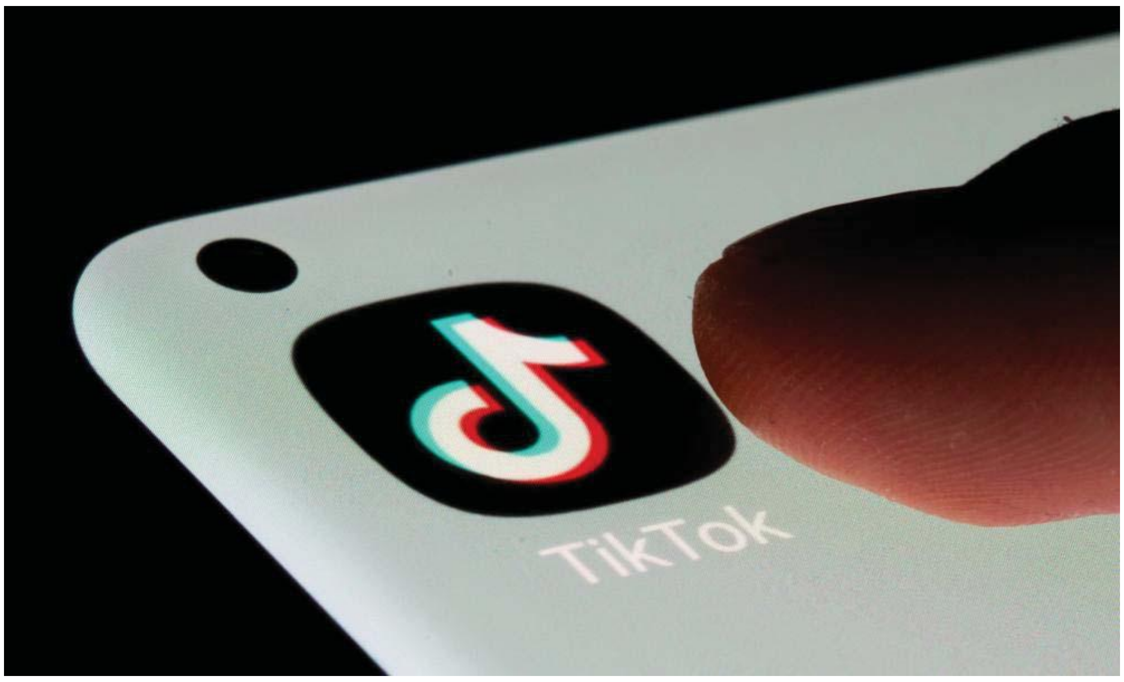
TikTok self-harm study results 'every parent's nightmare'

Dan Milmo and Alex Hern

TikTok's recommendation algorithm pushes self-harm and eating disorder content to teenagers within minutes of them expressing interest in the topics, research suggests.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) found that the video-sharing site will promote content including dangerously restrictive diets, pro-self-harm content and content romanticising suicide to users who show a preference for the material, even if they are registered as under-18s.

For its study the campaign group set up accounts in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, registered with ages of 13, the minimum age for joining the service. It created "standard" and "vulnerable" accounts, the latter containing the term "loseweight" in their usernames, which CCDH said reflected research showing that social media users who seek out eating disorder content often choose usernames containing related language.



▲ *The researchers set up accounts in the US, UK, Canada and Australia registered with ages of 13. Photograph: Dado Ruvić/Reuters*

The accounts "paused briefly" on videos about body image, eating disorders and mental health, and also liked them. This took place over a 30-minute initial period when the accounts launched, in an attempt to capture the effectiveness of TikTok's algorithm that recommends content to users.

On "standard" accounts, content about suicide followed within nearly three minutes and eating disorder material was shown within eight minutes.

"The results are every parent's nightmare," said Imran Ahmed, CCDH's chief executive. "Young people's feeds are bombarded with harmful, harrowing content that can have a significant cumulative impact on their understanding of the world around them, and their physical and mental health."

The group said the majority of mental health videos presented to its standard accounts via the For You feed – the main way TikTok users experience the app – consisted of users sharing their anxieties and insecurities.

Body image content was more harmful, the report said, with accounts registered for 13-year-olds being shown videos advertising weight loss drinks and "tummy-tuck" surgery. One animation that appeared in front of the standard accounts carried a piece of audio stating "I've been starving myself for you" and had more than 100,000 likes. The report said the accounts were shown self-harm or eating disorder videos every 206 seconds.

The researchers found that videos relating to body image, mental health and eating disorders were shown to "vulnerable" accounts three times more than to standard accounts. The vulnerable accounts received 12 times as many recommendations for self-harm and suicide-related videos as the standard accounts, the report said.

The recommended content was more extreme for the vulnerable accounts, including methods of self-harm and young people discussing plans to kill themselves. CCDH said a mental health or body image-related video was shown every 27 seconds, although the content was dominated by mental health videos, which CCDH defined as videos about anxieties, insecurities and mental health conditions, excluding eating disorders, self-harm and suicide.

The group said its research did not differentiate between content with a positive intent – such as content discovering recovery – or negative content.

A spokesperson for TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese firm ByteDance and has more than 1 billion users worldwide, said the CCDH study did not reflect the experience or viewing habits of real-life users of the app.

"We regularly consult with health experts, remove violations of our policies and provide access to supportive resources for anyone in need," they said. "We're mindful that triggering content is unique to each individual and remain focused on fostering a safe and comfortable space for everyone, including people who choose to share their recovery journeys or educate others on these important topics."

TikTok's guidelines ban content that promotes behaviour that could lead to suicide and self-harm, as well as material that promotes unhealthy eating behaviours or habits.

The UK's online safety bill proposes requiring social networks to take action against so-called "legal but harmful" content being shown to children.

A DCMS spokesperson said "We are putting a stop to unregulated social media causing harm to our children. Under the Online Safety Bill, tech platforms will need to prevent under-18s from being exposed to illegal content assisting suicide and protect them from other harmful or age-inappropriate material, including the promotion of self-harm and eating disorders, or face huge fines."

● *In the UK, the youth suicide charity Papyrus can be contacted on 0800 068 4141 or email pat@papyrus-uk.org. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or by emailing jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org. You can contact the mental health charity Mind by calling 0300 123 3393 or visiting mind.org.uk.*

Twitter suspends account monitoring Elon Musk's flight paths

Maya Yang

Twitter on Wednesday suspended an account that monitors the flight paths of a private jet owned by the social media giant's new boss, Elon Musk.

Later that evening, the account, @ElonJet, confirmed via tweet it was back online after being suspended for "violat[ing] Twitter rules". An hour later, Musk again suspended the jet-tracking account after imposing new conditions on all of Twitter's users that the sharing of anyone's current location was not allowed.

The account is run by Jack Sweeney, a Florida college student and aviation enthusiast who ran similar "bot" accounts tracking other celebrities' airplanes. For hours after the suspension of the @elonjet account, other Sweeney-run accounts tracking private jets used by Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and various Russian oligarchs were still live on Twitter.



▲ *Elon Musk had previously tried to get the account's owner, Jack Sweeney, to delete it in exchange for $5,000. Photograph: Dado Ruvić/Reuters*

But by later on Wednesday, Twitter suspended all of them, including Sweeney's personal account. He also operates accounts tracking Musk's jet on rival social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, the account also began tracking the flight paths of various Russian oligarchs.

The decision to suspend the account underscored concerns about the new Twitter CEO's unilateral control over content decisions on the platform. On 7 November, shortly after acquiring Twitter for $44bn, Musk tweeted: "My commitment to free speech extends even to not banning the account following my plane, even though that is a direct personal safety risk."

But on Wednesday morning, Sweeney tweeted: "Well, it appears @ElonJet is suspended."

He also tweeted a screenshot of a Twitter message that read: "After careful review, we determined your account broke the Twitter Rules. Your account is permanently in read-only mode, which means you can't Tweet, Retweet, or Like content. You won't be able to create new accounts."

Twitter, which under Musk has dissolved much of its media department, did not respond to a request for comment.

Over the weekend, Sweeney tweeted that his account had been shadowbanned, meaning that its visibility had been deliberately reduced.

"Internal messages obtained by a [n] anonymous Twitter employee explained to me that on '2 Dec[ember] 2022 your account @elonjet was visibility limited/restricted to a severe degree internally,'" Sweeney wrote.

He then included a screenshot that

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allegedly showed Ella Irwin, vice-president of Twitter's trust and safety council, asking her team to apply "heavy VF [visibility filtering] to @elonjet immediately".

The trust and safety council was dissolved on Monday. The same day, Sweeney tweeted that it appeared @ElonJet was no longer banned or hidden.

On Wednesday, Sweeney did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

When Musk discovered the @ElonJet account, earlier this year, he asked Sweeney to delete it.

"Can you take this down? It is a security risk," he wrote to Sweeney, adding: "I don't love the idea of being shot by a nutcase."

In February, Sweeney told the Guardian: "And then he offers me $5,000 to make it harder for people to track him and to take down the account, and I make my counter-offer."

Sweeney replied: "Any chance to up that to $50K? It would be great support in college and would possibly allow me to get a car, maybe even a [Tesla] Model 3."

Musk, the owner of Tesla, which makes electric cars, declined to pay up. He eventually blocked Sweeney on Twitter.

Warriors' Stephen Curry set for MRI after injuring left shoulder at Indiana

Agencies

Stephen Curry started Wednesday night unsure whether he would play at Indiana because of a sore right knee.

He finished it in the locker room with an injured left shoulder.

The eight-time All-Star, two-time MVP and NBA career leader in three-pointers is expected to have an MRI on Thursday after leaving during the third quarter of Golden State's 125-119 loss at Indiana.

Curry was injured with about two minutes left in the third quarter as the Warriors tried to rally from a 20-point halftime deficit. His three-point play with 4:16 to go in the third got Golden State within 83-80.

But when Pacers forward Jalen Smith dribbled toward the baseline, Curry tried to stop him by sticking his left arm out. Smith continued, and Curry's arm bent back awkwardly. Curry grabbed his shoulder while standing hunched over on the court then walked to the locker room during the next timeout.

"The trainers told me midway through the fourth quarter that he wasn't going to return," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "I trust their judgment. I only spoke to him briefly after the game, so I haven't had a chance to talk with him yet."



▲ Warriors guard Stephen Curry shoots over Pacers center Myles Turner during the first half of Wednesday's game. Photograph: Michael Conroy/AP

Curry did not take questions after scoring 38 points, making five threes and all 11 of his free throws. He isn't expected to speak to reporters again until Friday, when the defending NBA champs visit Philadelphia on the third stop of a six-game trip.

The Warriors already have lost their first two games on their longest Eastern swing of the season. Now they may be without their best player as they try to climb back above .500.

"This is a tough stretch of the season and if Steph's out, it gets tougher for sure," Kerr said. "If we're healthy, I feel like we can beat anybody – I think this team has proven that. We've just got to find a way to get there."

Curry was his usual, sensational self while he was in the game. He accounted for half of the Warriors' 54 first-half points and finished with seven rebounds, seven assists and two steals.

All-Star guard Klay Thompson missed his second straight game with a right knee injury and Andrew Wiggins sat out with an abdominal injury. Then in the fourth quarter, forward Draymond Green was ejected after picking up two technical fouls in a span of 14 seconds.

Because of Curry, the Warriors still had a chance.

"He basically put us on his shoulders for the minutes he was out there," Kerr said. "He was getting to the line, finding other people and I thought the guys did great job of battling."

But if Curry misses any substantial time, the Warriors won't be the same.

"Steph's always a guy with a great outlook on life," Kerr said. "So we're hoping for the best."

The badly misfiring Timberwolves are proof that NBA rosters aren't math

Claire de Lune

It's been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. While this is admittedly a bit of an oversimplification, if we're going on definitions alone, a healthy portion of NBA franchises are, then, insane. The theory that teams are just a sum of their parts – and thus the higher profile and more talented the parts, the better the team – has been disproved time and time again. Sure, having a superstar or two is incredibly helpful (and maybe even necessary) for summiting the highest heights of NBA success, but it's not a the-more-All-Stars-the-merrier proposition. One needs look no further than the smoldering pile of rubble that was the hopes for a championship of the Big Three in Brooklyn, or last year's disastrous Los Angeles Lakers, for evidence that more isn't always *more* when it comes to superstar talent. And yet, despite its definitively unsatisfactory track record, teams seem to try this method time and time again.

The most recent example of this insanity-borne-out can be found in the frozen tundra of Minneapolis. The Minnesota Timberwolves have been, to put it mildly, a historically underwhelming franchise. Entering the 2021-22 season, in fact, the Wolves held the discomfiting crown of being the all-time losingest franchise in North American sports, nudging out the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers for the dubious distinction. The expectations for the team, at the time, were about as low as possible, which made for an all the more feel-good story as the suddenly gelling Timberwolves stacked improbable wins – and, markedly, enjoyed the hell out of themselves – leading to one of only two playoff appearances for the team since the halcyon days of Kevin Garnett in 2004. The Wolves' No 1 overall draft pick in 2020, Anthony Edwards, seemed to be especially thriving, with a new coach in Chris Finch and a roster that, while lacking in defense, facilitated his growth and gave him the space to do what he does best, most notably dunking on people within an inch of their lives.



▲ The Minnesota Timberwolves' D'Angelo Russell, Rudy Gobert and Anthony Edwards pose for a portrait in September. Photograph: Jordan Johnson/NBAE/Getty Images

Their *other* No 1 overall draft pick on the roster, Karl-Anthony Towns, also had a stellar regular season last year (tempered by an underwhelming playoffs showing), resulting in a third All-Star Game appearance, even going on to become only the third big man to win the three-point contest. All and all, even considering that they lost a hotly contested series to Memphis (in sometimes head-scratching fashion), it was hard not to consider the season a resounding success. On top of this, after years of calling for the head of Glen Taylor – the franchise's nearly universally unpopular steward – Timberwolves fans had gotten their wish: a gradual changing of the guard to a new ownership group helmed by Marc Lore and onetime embattled MLB superstar Alex Rodriguez that began shortly before the 2022 season started. All around, the future seemed eminently bright in the land of 10,000 lakes.



▲ Anthony Edwards (1) and Rudy Gobert (27) of the Minnesota Timberwolves walk on the court during an October game against the Oklahoma City Thunder. Photograph: David Sherman/NBAE/Getty Images

Shortly after the Timberwolves were eliminated from the playoffs, at the conclusion of the aforementioned first-round series with Memphis, the new ownership group made their first big chess move: coaxing GM Tim Connelly away from his longtime post with the Denver Nuggets. The hiring marked the beginning of what would be an aggressive off-season for the team. They were perhaps a little high on their own supply of good vibes: the whiff of success they'd gotten mixed with the excitement of new ownership propelling them into a summer of decision-making that seemed to be predicated

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on both a "win-now" mentality and a faith that ascending superstar Edwards was ready to be the number one offensive option.

What happened next was the result, it seems in hindsight, of an error in judgment, compounded by several other errors alongside it. To break them down one by one: the first blunder appears to be the assumption that Edwards' electrifying postseason debut occurred in spite of, and not in part because of, his supporting cast- several key members of which were shipped off to Utah in the eventual trade for Rudy Gobert, including Patrick Beverley, who literally cried tears of joy when they qualified for the playoffs. The second, that Edwards was ready to be The Guy – 28 games of evidence thus far seems to imply that maybe the 21-year-old could have used another year of development. The third, the hubris that one year of overachieving was so promising that it warranted a bold "upgrade" (in quotations in light of the results thus far) to the roster. The final, and indeed most devastating mistake, brings us back to the insanity component: the hefty wager that swapping out several key role players for a big-name superstar was bound to make the team better, despite questions about fit, and, as we already established, *years of evidence to the contrary*.

That swap for a superstar came with a historic price tag: to acquire Gobert, the Wolves parted with four first-round picks (three of which are unprotected), a pick swap, the promising young talent Jarred Vanderbilt, Beverley, Malik Beasley, Leandro Bolmero, and their 2022 draft pick in Walker Kessler. That's quite a mortgage for a player who, yes, was named Defensive Player of the Year three times with as many All-Star selections, but who, in eight years in the league, has never made it even as far as the conference finals, and who has come under fire for his lackluster playoff performances (even on the defensive end on which he's made his name in the regular season).

The early returns on the gamble have not been great. Pre-season hype about the newly minted attempt at a superteam prompted chatter around the league of a surefire playoffs spot, and maybe even a chance at a finish near the top of the Western Conference. But after Wednesday's loss to the LA Clippers, the Timberwolves are two games below .500 with a 13-15 record, and the natives (fans) are growing restless. The team has looked disjointed, often lackadaisical, and downright devoid of the galvanic chemistry that propelled them in their Cinderella story last year.

In something of a departure from the 'Minnesota Nice' trope, those fans are not being shy in expressing their displeasure with the team's performance, prompting several players to acknowledge the epidemic of booing at home games to the press – though the contrast in their responses feels telling. Edwards seemed to look inward in response to the booing, saying after a loss to the San Antonio Spurs early in the season: "We're getting booed at home, it's crazy. We gotta find ourselves … but the fans are not wrong. We look bad." Gobert took a less introspective approach, speaking on the fans to Jon Krawczynski about a month later after a home loss to the Heat elicited more jeering from the crowd: "There's no team in NBA history that only had good moments, so if you're not going to support us in the tough moments, just stay home."

Many of the losses came even before Towns went down with a calf sprain at the end of November (he's expected to miss a month or more). Chemistry and fit issues – and, by extension, issues with effort and intensity – have clearly plagued the team all season, and the Towns injury is, in some ways, the least of their problems. I asked head coach Chris Finch after a particularly demoralizing loss at home to Golden State how he felt about the state of the team's chemistry, and he didn't mince words. "I don't think we have great chemistry right now," he admitted. "I think we're trying to figure it out. But I just think on any given night we don't really know how it's all going to fit together."

For a team that seemed to be having the time of their lives last year, it's pretty stark and, quite frankly, depressing as hell to watch them be veritably joyless just a season later. It's especially troubling with Edwards, as developmental years like these can have such a profound impact on the trajectory of an emerging superstar. And the angsty mess is made all the more frustrating by how utterly avoidable it was, had the team just taken a more patient approach, valued the role players who gave them identity, and given more consideration to personnel alchemy instead of shiny new toys and broad strokes. Because as much as NBA owners and GMs like to believe otherwise, successful teams aren't math: they're science. Chemistry, to be exact. And doubling, tripling, quadrupling down on the contrary? Well, that's just lunacy.

Boris Becker deported from UK after being released from prison

Amelia Hill

The three-time Wimbledon champion Boris Becker has been deported from the UK after being freed from jail.

The 55-year-old German, who has lived in the UK since 2012, was released on Thursday after serving eight months of a two-and-a-half-year sentence.

The six-time grand slam champion was jailed in April for hiding £2.5m of assets and loans to avoid paying his debts.

Becker was expected to remain in jail for half of his sentence but was recently approved for a fast-track scheme in which foreign citizens are deported if certain conditions are met. The Home Office removed 1,136 foreign national offenders under its early removal programme last year.

The former world No 1 tennis player and BBC commentator has been deported because he is a foreign national without British citizenship who received a custodial sentence of more than 12 months. Becker will not be allowed to apply to enter the UK for 10 years.



▲ *Boris Becker arriving at Southwark crown court in London in April. Photograph: Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images*

Some reports suggested Becker had been flown to Germany on a private jet paid for by a TV company that has reportedly paid him a six-figure fee for his story. His mother has spoken of her delight over his expected return to his home country. According to the Sun, Elvira Becker said: "This is the best Christmas present I could hope for – I cannot wait to hold my beloved son in my arms."

Becker is thought to have been transferred to a lower-security jail for foreign criminals awaiting deportation in May – the category C Huntercombe prison near Henley-on-Thames in Oxfordshire – after previously reportedly being held at the category B Wandsworth prison in south-west London.

He was declared bankrupt on 21 June 2017 – owing creditors almost £50m – over an unpaid loan of more than £3m on his estate in Mallorca.

Apple TV has released a clip of the upcoming documentary, directed by Alex Gibney and produced by John Battsek, who is known for Oscar-winning documentaries such as Searching for Sugar Man.

The two-part documentary follows Becker's life over three years in a series of interviews. In it, he talks about the emotional turmoil he felt prior to being sentenced over bankruptcy offences.

Speaking before his sentencing, Becker said he hit "bottom" while awaiting the court's decision. "I've hit my [rock] bottom, I don't know what to make of it," he is filmed saying. "I [will] face [my sentence], I'm not going to hide or run away. [I will] accept whatever sentence I'm going to get."

On the rise: seven of the World Cup's biggest breakout stars

Will Unwin and John Brewin

Saud Abdulhamid
Saudi Arabia and Al Hilal

There was plenty to analyse when Saudi Arabia shocked Argentina in their opening game. A lot of focus was put on the lacklustre efforts of the Argentinians, who were beaten by the better team on the day. One of the key giant-killers was the right-back Abdulhamid, who has 26 caps – not bad for a 23-year-old. His hero is Brazil's Dani Alves, which explains the marauding nature of his play up and down the flank. He brings speed, pinpoint tackling and is comfortable in possession, as well as being a set-piece specialist and having the adaptability to operate in midfield. Clubs in Europe have taken note after his impressive efforts, with Sevilla, Milan and Juventus scouts monitoring his progress. He has captained his country, a sign of his importance for Saudi Arabia, and is tipped to lead them in the years to come. WU

Yassine 'Bono' Bounou
Morocco and Sevilla

Sevilla's status as a foremost club in polishing talent continued in Qatar through the brilliance of Morocco's goalkeeper, though perhaps his status as a Europa League winner who played a crucial part in their 2020 final win over Inter ought not to have made him such a breakout star. Those two penalty saves against Spain, the country where he has played for the past decade, and his command of Morocco's excellent, tightly drilled defence mark him out as one of the World Cup's major talents. Canada-born and multilingual, the 31-year-old will be on any list for scouts looking for an experienced, organising goalkeeper who has shown himself to be adaptable. And Sevilla always have a price for their talent. JB

Ritsu Doan
Japan and Freiburg

Japan's defeats of Germany and Spain will live long in national memory and followed a similar pattern. Once Doan came on the field, everything changed. Four minutes after his arrival in the first game, Doan equalised against the country where he has played his football, first for Arminia

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Bielefeld and, since the summer, Freiburg. Then, against Spain, Doan came on at half-time and scored within three minutes. That his team lost both games Doan started does, though, throw questions up against a player occasionally referred to as "Japan's Messi". He previously struggled to make an impact at PSV Eindhoven but after five years in European football anyone who can harness a winger of withering speed and a latent goal threat running beyond the strikers will have a serious asset to call upon. In this era of five substitutes, impact players have increased in premium. JB

Aïssa Laïdouni
Tunisia and Ferencvaros

Among the litany of goalless draws at the start of the tournament came a classic of the genre in Denmark v Tunisia. Laïdouni excelled in a game played in high heat and dominated a talented, experienced Denmark midfield with his energy and devilment, making one lung-bursting run after another. In that game, and against Australia, he was substituted when he could give no more, but his capacity for putting himself about was hugely striking. When Tunisia completed a historic win



▲ *Left to right: Japan's Ritsu Doan, Azzedine Ounahi of Morocco, and Saudi Arabia's Saud Abdulhamid. Composite: Getty Images; Shutterstock*

over France in their final group game, Laïdouni was again in the vanguard. The Ferencvaros player, lately linked with Celtic, would seem ideal for a high-pressing team. Born in France, and after starting his career with Angers, he has played in Romania and now Hungary, this season competing in the Europa League for that country's champions. JB

Dominik Livakovic
Croatia and Dinamo Zagreb

The goalkeeper made himself a shootout hero in Croatia's wins over Japan and Brazil but his consistency as well as his penalty saves have made him the tournament's standout goalkeeper, despite giving away a spot-kick in the semi-final defeat by Argentina. Livakovic has spent his entire career in Zagreb, first at NK before moving to Dinamo, where he has won five domestic titles. He was part of the Croatia squad that finished runners-up four years ago, but watched from the bench as understudy to one of his heroes, Danijel Subasic. Since then, the 27-year-old has become his country's No 1 thanks to his reflexes and imposing nature in the box. He has been linked with Bayern Munich in recent weeks and could attract plenty more interest in the winter transfer window. WU

Azzedine Ounahi
Morocco and Angers

After Morocco had seen off Spain in a shootout, Luis Enrique could have been forgiven for feeling disappointed, but he took time to praise his opponents, singling out Ounahi. The midfielder made his international debut in January at the Africa Cup of Nations and was playing in the French third tier 18 months ago. He is now with Ligue 1's bottom club, Angers, but has the confidence of a man playing at a higher level. Ounahi has spent the tournament breaking the lines in midfield, providing constant energy, while also being key in a Morocco setup that was hard to break down. He has a contract until 2025 at Angers, who would be smart to sell the 22-year-old in January with his price rightly high thanks to helping his country to the semi-finals. WU

Harry Souttar
Australia and Stoke

Australia's success derived much from an alliance of A-League graduates and players of Scottish origin. Souttar, whose older brother, John, plays for Rangers and Scotland, is an Aberdonian with a Western Australian mother.



▲ *Yassine 'Bono' Bounou at the centre of Morocco's celebrations after the defeat of Spain on penalties. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian*

His dreadnought defending laid foundations for famous wins over Tunisia and Denmark as the Socceroos reached the last 16. Three seasons ago, he was on loan at Fleetwood. Stoke, who signed him from Dundee United in 2016, had been denied his services for the past year by a cruciate injury. He had played one club game this season, against Luton on 8 November, before flying out to become an Australian national hero. At 6ft 6in, he dominated the air traffic and Graham Arnold, his national manager, has been only too happy to recommend him to Premier League suitors: "I'd be banging on his door real quick. He's that good." He was quickly back in action with Stoke at home to Cardiff last Saturday and is in line to feature at Bristol City on Saturday. JB

France plot new plan to stop Lionel Messi after Kanté's 2018 masterclass

Nick Ames in Doha

It was a job so comprehensive, so thoroughly performed to the letter, that France's players converted it to song. "N'Golo Kanté, he's short, he's nice, he shut down Leo Messi but we all know he's a cheater," went the lyrics after their midfielder, detailed to smother Argentina's No 10 in Kazan four years ago, barely allowed him a sniff.

Messi was given little more than an assist for Sergio Agüero's late consolation; he would finish the afternoon gazing at his feet and suspecting a dream had gone up in smoke, while France sailed through to the quarter-finals and far beyond.

The reference to deception? Kanté's teammates had a running gag, not entirely based on fiction as he later admitted, that he cheated at cards. But they will need a joker of their own at the World Cup final, because their tried and tested recipe for success is unavailable. This time France have gone all the way without an injured Kanté and it has not always been convincing. When Messi, whose last fling at this level has comfortably been his best, awaits at Lusail on Sunday they must find a similarly effective solution.

That is not lost on France's players, especially those such as Olivier Giroud, who saw everything close up at that last meeting. Their celebrations upon pulling through against Morocco on Wednesday were, publicly at least, low-key because they knew what lay ahead.



▲ *Argentina's Lionel Messi reacts after being defeated by France at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Photograph: Franck Fife/AFP/Getty Images*

Like Argentina, they are a team of moments rather than sustained spells of coherence and control. Someone other than Kanté needs to make sure Messi is denied scope to spring his side into life.

"I remember in 2018, N'Golo was on his back, behind him, all of the game," said Giroud, showing unprompted recall when the topic came his way. "But this time I don't know what the plan will be. We will see with the manager."

Didier Deschamps has three days to find one. "He had a very precise role," the manager said of Kanté after the spoiling job in Tatarstan. "It is true that we didn't really see much of Lionel Messi when he played against us."

Messi drifts even more freely, more lightly, around the pitch nowadays; he has a habit of standing in seemingly dead space before attracting the play. The ball will find him, that much is certain. The key lies in limiting those moments and denying him oxygen when it comes his way. If it was so easy, everyone would do it.

Sometimes you can put your best defender, and perhaps the tournament's, in his path and still be pulled apart. Croatia and Josko Gvardiol discovered that on Tuesday. A functioning midfield will give France their best hope, though, and Aurélien Tchouaméni has admirably bridged the Kanté-Paul Pogba gap over the past month. A first-half burst through Morocco's lines, almost resulting in a goal for Giroud or Kylian Mbappé, was among their most pulse-raising moments but life was not always easy against slick and mobile opposition.

"It's both," Tchouaméni said when asked which of the absentees' roles he occupies. "Sometimes it's to recover some balls and sometimes I have the opportunity to score a goal like the last game [against England], or today with almost-assists. It's a mix between those. We try to do our best to help the team in the middle of the pitch. I think we've done a great job."

If Adrien Rabiot is fit for the final then perhaps Tchouaméni will attempt more of a devoted screening job. All the same, Deschamps may prefer to pass the responsibility for Messi around this time rather than allocate one captor. It helps that Antoine Griezmann, much more than a No 10, has been France's everywhere man. In the 31-year-old they have an advanced, remodelled midfielder who has shown he can slot in to bolster the pair behind while marshalling the space in front. Messi may not be able to drop as deep as he would like to get Argentina moving if Griezmann is snapping away.

"We are not going to let him enjoy the best night he can have," Giroud said. "We want to win another World Cup. We will try everything to stop him." It will take knowhow.

Giroud pointed out that France's younger players, such as Tchouaméni and Tchouaméni's former Monaco teammate Youssouf Fofana, have the benefit of a senior core who know exactly what a winning campaign takes. The older generation set an example from the front. During the first half against Morocco, the veteran centre-forward Giroud trailed the influential holding midfielder Sofyan Amrabat so



▲ *Aurélien Tchouaméni holds off Sofyan Amrabat as France beat Morocco to book their place in the World Cup final. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian*

diligently that his opponent said: "Just stop!" The sense is that a collective effort presents the best hope of nullifying Messi.

But sometimes, as Kanté knows all too well, you can play your cheat card. The 4-3 thriller in 2018 was equally notable as a watershed moment for Mbappé, who was unplayable in scoring twice and winning a penalty. It was logical to think the baton of greatness had been handed to the younger man. As it turns out, the Paris Saint-Germain teammates more or less share it now. For all the talk, the best answer to Messi might be a similar exhibition from France's biggest hope.

Mbappé was asked, as he paced through Al Bayt Stadium's underbelly, for his thoughts about playing in another final. "Really excited," was his succinct offering. France must ensure the thrills arise in his realm and not that of the legend he stands to usurp.

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Mick Schumacher into the Mercedes reserve driver seat after leaving Ferrari

PA Media

Mick Schumacher has been announced as Mercedes' reserve driver for 2023 after parting ways with Ferrari. The Italian manufacturer announced on Thursday that the 23-year-old had left the company by mutual agreement after four years working together.

He joined the Ferrari driver academy in 2019 and progressed to Formula One two years later by driving for Haas, their partner team, but he was dropped for next season in favour of Nico Hulkenberg.

Mercedes had already made their interest known and it was swiftly confirmed that Schumacher would follow in the footsteps of his father, Michael, by joining the Formula One giants.

"I am thrilled to be part of the Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 team as their reserve driver for 2023, and I am committed to give it my all to contribute to their performance in this very competitive and professional environment," said Schumacher.

"I take this as a new start, and I am just excited and grateful to [team principal] Toto [Wolff] and everybody involved for putting their trust in me."

Schumacher will spend time helping develop what Mercedes will hope will be a car that can challenge for the drivers' and constructors' titles again as well as providing back-up to Lewis Hamilton and George Russell.

World Cup 2022 briefing: and then there were two

Daniel Harris, John Brewin, Martin Belam and Gregg Bakowski

Main event

And then there were two! After one of the least predictable World Cups of all-time, we now have a final that won't surprise anyone – and what a final it should be.

Fear not, the Briefing knows its history and is extremely aware of how foolish a comment that is – and yet, and yet, and yet. In their semi-finals, both Argentina and France came up against teams with nous and organisation, but both found a way to impose their class while showing sufficient defensive perviousness to excite each other for the final.

The array of offensive talent, though, is only part of what makes Sunday's showcase so theoretically appealing. Ultimately, sport is a story, stories agitate the human psyche like nothing else, and this is a game leaden with *narrative* and *meaning*; with *characters*and *themes*.

Argentina, already Copa América champions, are seeking to establish themselves as the finest internationalteam on the planet. And should they win on Sunday, they will leave behind France and Uruguay, who sit on two World Cups, to tuck in behind Germany and Italy who have four, and Brazil, leading the way with five, as football's, fourth, er, 'most winningest' nation. That's one thing.

But the other thing – a thing that's preoccupied us for the best part of a generation and has, to significant extent, defined this competition – is whether it will have the honour of being won by Lionel Messi. Whether he is the greatest player ever depends on your criteria – to the Briefing's mind Messi lacks the dangerous, intoxicating charisma of Diego Maradona at Mexico '86, where he played association football better than anyone before or since. But when it comes to sustained hand-over-mouth disbelief and involuntary shrieking of biological impossibilities, he's so far removed from everyone else it's hard not to wonder if he even exists. If Maradona did it like the devil, Messi plays like God.

France, meanwhile, are seeking pure glory, and a place among the gallery of the immortals. Not since Brazil in 1962 has the most significant trophy in football been retained, and should they become the first side to achieve the feat in the modern era, they will rival both their own country's achievement of taking the 1998 World Cup followed by Euro 2000, and Spain's in harvesting three consecutive titles – two European Championships and one World Cup – between 2008 and 2012.



▲ PSG teammates Lionel Messi (right) and Kylian Mbappé (right) will battle it out for football's greatest prize. Composite: Guardian Picture Desk

Like Argentina, they too have a player seeking what should be crowning glory of his career, aged just 23, Kylian Mbappé will be planning on winning another and another and another. Not since Maradona has there been a player of such inestimable confidence – of such justifiable certainty in the ridiculous uniqueness of his own ability – and he will expect to be the final's decisive figure. But unlike Maradona, who was all bouncing edge, and Messi, still a shuffling, unassuming magician, Mbappé is playful, childlike; and no less a killer, a footballing angel of death.

However, Argentina and France have reached this stage not because they have the best players – though they do – but because they are the best teams, and reducing a match with so many aspects to Messi v Mbappé is foolish – almost as foolish as predicting a classic. But that's football for you. Bring it on! DH

Talking points

Morocco fall short but they have been a creditWalid Regragui could not resist the temptation to risk those who had taken Morocco to the brink of history. But adrenaline and a sense of occasion proved no substitute for physical readiness. Nayef Aguerd could not even make it past the warmup, Romain Saïss signalled his thigh could not sustain him once he was burned off by Olivier Giroud. Noussair Mazraoui did not survive past half-time. All three had been on the doubtful list. Perhaps Regragui might have shown more faith in the depth of his squad. Once rejigged into a 4-3-3, Morocco matched France to have the defending champions looking to the clock and referee for respite. Sofyan Amrabat excelled in midfield, just as against Spain and Portugal. He has been a star, just as his team's run to the last four has been the most welcome story from Qatar's World Cup. JB

Argentina fans add authenticity in QatarTo those out in Qatar, the sense of jamboree found in previous World Cups has been somewhat absent. That's perhaps a byproduct of holding a tournament in a super-city constructed in the middle of a desert, an infrastructure built for the automobile rather than pedestrian. It is also suggested the cost of accommodation has been deliberately prohibitive to prevent the flood of humanity that usually swells the population of host cities. Morocco and Saudi Arabia, as Arab nations, have bucked that trend, as have Argentina. The South Americans always travel in huge numbers, doing so amid disappointment in Russia four years ago and with Rio turning into an Argentine enclave prior to the 2014 final against Germany. While questions continue to be raised over just how full stadiums have been, Argentina's wash of blue and white has added authenticity to the tournament, as do those lengthy, wordy terrace anthems their fans perform. JB

Beyond the football

It has been revealed that Friday's quarter-final between the Netherlands and Argentina was the scene of a further tragedy to accompany the loss of Grant Wahl. On the day Wahl's family announced an autopsy revealed an aortic aneurysm was the cause of the celebrated journalist's sudden death, it was revealed a Kenyan migrant worker, 24-year-old John Njue Kibue, died while working as a security guard.

Kibue fell from the eighth storey of the Lusail Stadium before dying after three days in intensive care, a witness telling the Guardian that Kibue had fallen from the highest point of the concourse close to gate 30 of the stadium. "Qatar's tournament organisers are investigating the circumstances leading to the fall as a matter of urgency," read a statement from Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy.

Anne Wanjiru, Kibue's sister, told the Standard newspaper in Nairobi that help and an explanation are yet to be forthcoming from either the Qatari authorities or Fifa. "We want answers on the circumstances of his death," she said. "They are claiming he was intoxicated. We hear he had worked for long hours. The clarity of how he fell is not coming out." JB

Global media-watch

Novi list made much of Novak Djokovic sending his congratulations to Croatia on Instagram, while it was good to see that the English media doesn't have a monopoly on bemoaning refereeing decisions in the wake of an untimely exit. Jutarnji list described Italian referee Daniele Orsato's decision to award a spot kick to Argentina as "the penalty that divided the whole world".

Antonio Juricic, the web sports editor at Slobodna Dalmacija, was having none of it. "Let's concentrate on the bronze, and not on the fact that we were victims again. Because we are not," he said in a piece which also argued that "there is nothing wrong with the fact that you lost playing the kind of football that brought you to the semi-finals of the World Cup, and there is no point in spreading negativity".

Reaction in Argentina was, of course, rather different. In the Buenos Aires Times, Dan Edwards asked: "who would bet against Argentina now?" Edwards added: "against all expectations Lionel Scaloni turned out to be an



▲ Romain Saïss (right) had to be withdrawn by Walid Regragui after just 20 minutes. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian

inspired choice, carrying out Argentina's much-needed regeneration with minimal pain and forging a team abundant in both individual talent and collective spirit."

Among the celebrations there was a bit of defensiveness. La Nación devoted a whole column by Juan Manuel Trenado that attempted to refute the notion that Argentina had been favoured by refereeing decisions throughout the tournament. Trenado said that "the 10 minutes of added time that Mateu Lahoz gave and that allowed the Netherlands to draw", among other things, showed Fifa was not guiding Argentina into the final. Clarín put it simplest of all on their sports pages with the headline: "For the third World Cup". MB

The internet reacts

This pitchside view of Lionel Messi only makes you have even more sympathy for young Josko Gvardiol. GB

And finally …

Football has changed a lot over the decades, but an eternal pleasure is that – unlike many other team sports – quality is not directly proportionate to athleticism and physicality. For that reason the schemer exists and, though contemporary footballing vernacular has moved on there will always be a place in the game for a deft, cunning, lithe, tough, little kid who sees things that others don't, directing the big kids around the pitch according to their whims. There have been few as scheming as Luka Modric who, at 37, is coming to the end of his World Cup career. Not only a great of his generation but a great of the game, Modric is near-enough the perfect midfielder, the brains and heart behind Croatia's stunning consistency; Saturday's third-place playoff is an opportunity for us to appreciate him while we still can. DH

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Ben Stokes aims for Pakistan clean sweep and ponders Rehan Ahmed debut

Ali Martin in Karachi

Ben Stokes has challenged his England players to turn their tour of Pakistan into a historic clean sweep as he and Brendon McCullum ponder a debut for the 18-year-old Rehan Ahmed.

Sitting 2-0 up with one Test to play going into the final instalment that starts in Karachi on Saturday – and on a run of eight wins from their past nine matches – England could become the first visitors to the country to record three Test victories in a series.

Citing the example of England's 3-0 win in Sri Lanka in 2018, Stokes said: "We won that series before the last Test and there was even more put on to it, knowing that we could become the only English team to register a whitewash in Sri Lanka.

"So although the series here is done and we'll still lift the trophy at the end regardless of the result, there's still an extra bit knowing that we could be one of the very few teams that could walk away from Pakistan with a whitewash series.



▲ *Rehan Ahmed bowls in the nets for England in Karachi. Photograph: Matthew Lewis/Getty Images*

"We've got some big challenges after the new year, with a tour of New Zealand and then the big one with the Ashes. But 2022 has been one to look back on with very good memories. I've really enjoyed it."

England's dominant position this week brings with it the possibility of handing Ahmed his first Test cap, a move which would make the leg-spinner – 18 years and 126 days old on day one – England's youngest Test cricketer, breaking the record held by Brian Close (18 years and 149 days against New Zealand in 1949).

While Stokes was intending to make a late call on his final selection of the year, as he and the head coach assess conditions at the National Stadium, the captain stressed that, if Ahmed was picked, it would be because he is deemed ready.

Stokes said: "I don't think it would be a case of giving caps away. We picked Rehan in the squad not just because of his talent and to integrate him, but because it would be a good opportunity to play him if we thought it was necessary.

"I'm struggling to work out what he is, whether he's a batter or a leg-spinner, which is good I guess, because it shows how much talent he's got.

"Having a wrist-spinner is always exciting, especially for England, but it's not getting too carried away with the potential that he has. Because he is only young, and you've still got to nurture talent, no matter how exciting it is."

Stokes, once dismissed by Ahmed in the nets when the spinner was 11 years old, believes it would also send a message to young players from the British Asian community at a time when the sport's inclusive credentials remain under the microscope.

"I have always felt cricket is a very inclusive sport," Stokes said. "Certainly during my time in the England team, you have been selected on your skills as a cricketer first and foremost and that still should be the way going forward.



▲ *Brendon McCullum (left) and Ben Stokes will make a late call on their selection for England. Photograph: Matthew Lewis/Getty Images*

"Rehan, he could be an unbelievable example to set for younger kids who want to come up. They may have maybe heard about what's happened in cricket recently [but] he can be seen as 'we've got this 18-year-old, hopefully a potential superstar, why can't I be that?'"

London identified by IMG as key in effort to transform rugby league

Aaron Bower

London has been dubbed a 'sleeping giant' of rugby league by IMG, who say success in the capital is high on their agenda when it comes to transforming the sport's long-term prospects. The global media company agreed a 12-year deal with rugby league's powerbrokers in May in an attempt to revolutionise the game on and off the field, with a licensing system set to replace conventional promotion and relegation for Super League by 2025.

IMG's vice president for sports management, Matt Dwyer, says that capturing the attention of people in London and developing the sport in the city is firmly among their priorities after their research showed it ranks better than traditional rugby league cities in areas such as participation and interest.

The belief that London can become a success was heightened by England's World Cup semi-final against Samoa at the Emirates Stadium in November, when the majority of those in attendance came from the capital. Dwyer stressed that while the plans will take time, London has the potential to become a rugby league powerhouse in the years ahead.



▲ *A significant proportion of the fans attending England's World Cup semi-final at the Emirates Stadium were from London. Photograph: Michael Steele/Getty Images*

"The thing that surprised us is when we looked at all the data, you took the names off the cities and looked at participation, interest and a few other metrics, London was at the top and I don't think anyone would have guessed that," he said. "We're all sitting there thinking there's a sleeping giant here: we're not saying London for the sake of it because it's London. We're saying it because there's a future here and the metrics we've seen suggest it."

Rugby league has tried to have a strong professional presence in London before. While London Broncos were a fixture in Super League for a prolonged period, they are now a part-time club playing in the sport's second tier, the Championship. London Skolars play in the level below, League 1. Dwyer appeared to rule out creating a new London club but warned rugby league must learn from its past failings when it comes to the capital.

"The demographic from both participation and interest is very positive but we are going to need a club that's competitive," he said. "I'm keen to work with both clubs. But the step we're at now is revisiting the past and working out what we can learn from that.



▲ *Richard Branson (centre) is one of many who have tried and failed to make the London Broncos sustainable. Photograph: Frank Baron/The Guardian*

"It's still very early days. It's a long-term project, we're not going to be able to click our fingers and 20,000 people will turn up to watch the Broncos. But it's got the right foundations."

Worcester's hopes of resurrection at elite level at risk due to RFU demands

Gerard Meagher

Worcester's hopes of resurrecting as an elite level club have been plunged into danger with their prospective new owners braced for the Rugby Football Union to refuse entry into next season's Championship due to demands which "raise the spectre of shadow dictatorship".

The consortium – led by the chief executive Jim O'Toole – has taken aim at the RFU, claiming the union's conditions for approval are "unreasonable" while on another dramatic day for Worcester, Steve Diamond – the club's former director of rugby whose rival bid had previously failed – also declared his consortium was still primed to swoop in.

The RFU board is due to meet on Friday to decide whether to approve the takeover by Atlas Worcester Warriors Rugby Club Ltd, backed by the O'Toole and James Sandford consortium, but is understood to not be satisfied over a number of conditions.

Seemingly pre-empting the RFU's decision, Atlas released a statement criticising the "over-onerous terms" and, in worrying news for supporters, threatened to press ahead with the takeover without the RFU's approval. The takeover needs to be approved by the RFU if Worcester are to take part in next season's Championship, leaving the Warriors potentially having to join the bottom of the grassroots pyramid.

While the RFU publicly insisted that no decision has been made, it is understood the union could yet urge the administrators, Begbies Traynor, to consider rival bids – having previously identified Atlas as the preferred bidder – which in turn could bring Diamond's consortium back into play.

The RFU has been widely criticised

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Continued *from page 48*

for its failure to act to prevent the plights of Worcester and Wasps – whose takeover is expected to be approved – while the chief executive, Bill Sweeney, was accused of being "asleep on the job" at a parliamentary inquiry and as a result, the union is heavily scrutinising the deals.

The RFU club financial viability group's concerns over the Worcester takeover are understood to centre on commitments relating to the land around the stadium and a need to approve the disposal of that land, quick payment of rugby creditors and commitments to the women's team. In particular, there are concerns relating to the financial position of the buyers and their ability to continue to fund the club and deliver on the business plan which includes significant development at the Sixways site.

Atlas, however, considers the conditions to be overbearing. "Since entering into exclusivity with the administrators, we have sought to work collaboratively with the RFU with a view to Worcester Warriors re-entering the Championship for the 2023-24 season," read a statement.



▲ *Worcester's hopes of returning as an elite club are in danger of collapsing. Photograph: Nigel French/PA*

"Unfortunately, it has not been possible to reach a market or institutionally acceptable, commercially viable proposition with the RFU.

"The position being taken by the RFU gives, in our view, too much control and oversight to the RFU and such control and oversight is over and above what we consider is reasonable and appropriate in the circumstances. The issues are provisions that are not only operationally restrictive, but they are oppressive and raise the spectre of shadow directorship on the part of the RFU.

"As a result, should the RFU not find the flexibility to remove the over-onerous terms they are seeking to impose on Atlas, we will have no alternative but to conclude the deal with Begbies without the approval of the RFU and without returning elite level rugby to Worcester."

Diamond used social media to state that his consortium, along with a former club sponsor, Adam Hewitt, had a plan to take Worcester back to the top flight. He said: "I can confirm that Adam Hewitt and I are fully committed to bringing Worcester Warriors back to the Premiership. We have the plan and the funding. Give us the opportunity. We will give you the rugby. Bring it on!"

The RFU had initially set a deadline of Monday for the takeovers to be completed but this week extended that to "before Christmas". Both clubs were suspended from the Premiership after going into administration and condemned to relegation at the end of the season but need the RFU's approval to take part in the 2023-24 Championship.


▲ *Steve Diamond has not given up hope of leading a takeover of Worcester. Photograph: David Davies/PA*

Whether they do will affect the Premiership's plans to restructure its league and align itself better with the second tier.

Argentina should get physical with stylish Antoine Griezmann to shut down France

Karen Carney

All the focus is on Kylian Mbappé and Lionel Messi but if Argentina want to win the World Cup final, the man they will need to stop is Antoine Griezmann. Mbappé has the No 10 on the back of his shirt but his teammate is playing the role to perfection.

Griezmann links everything together for France. Without the Atlético Madrid forward, Mbappé, Olivier Giroud and Ousmane Dembélé would not be getting the ball as much. No one has more than his three assists and that level of creativity will need to be stymied by Argentina.

Griezmann's overall performance has been outstanding. He has a slightly different role to the one at club level. He still operates as a No 10 but he has the freedom to roam for France, allowing him to drop deeper to collect the ball so he can affect the game more. The best No 10s have three ways of playing – they can operate in tight spaces, have the ability to run in behind and can also play as a winger – and he can do all of these.

I would advise Argentina to be physical with Griezmann. These types of players do not like the aggressive side when they are given no space or time on the ball. Argentina need to stop the ball at source to prevent it from getting to Mbappé, Giroud and Dembélé, who are more than capable of causing damage.

Griezmann has not shirked his defensive responsibilities. Against Morocco he was really good and at times he was acting as a centre-back when the ball was coming into the box. In addition to natural talent, players at the top require that level of drive and determination to help their team.


▲ *Antoine Griezmann can operate in tight spaces, has the ability to run in behind and can also play as a winger. Photograph: Kieran McManus/Shutterstock*

The Netherlands have offered France a plan to think about after troubling Argentina in the quarter-final. The aerial threat of Wout Weghorst highlighted that Argentina can struggle with the direct approach and that is something Giroud could make the most of. I am a huge fan of him, a great player who has had a fantastic career. He comes up with big goals at crucial moments and this is the occasion for those types of players.

France have looked solid at the back, further aided by Ibrahima Konaté coming into the team against Morocco. They will need their back four and midfield to be perfect against Argentina and a certain Paris Saint-Germain forward.

If it is Messi's last game for Argentina, he is going to turn it up another level. I have seen Messi in person for his club a couple of times but had not seen him play for his country before this World Cup. He has blown me away.

I know he walks around a lot waiting for those moments to pounce but when he does he is incredibly clinical and ruthless. It was mesmerising to watch him live. Every time he got the ball it was like the stage light was focused on him. Yes, everyone speaks about him, but how can you ignore him when he is that good?

Messi will be looking to make the most of France's mistakes. Both teams will aim to have good shape and sit behind the ball, with neither particularly wanting possession. France had 39% possession against Morocco and 43% against England and Argentina were on the back foot until they scored the opener against Croatia. Luka Modric et al had 61% possession but were caught out by the genius of Messi.

It is interesting that neither side really press. France did not Morocco in the semi-final; they went round the deep-lying midfielder and were quite happy if the ball went into him. Similarly, you do not see Messi or Julián Álvarez pressing – they just drop off and wait.

The finalists are not dominating the ball or pressing teams, but they have players capable of magic moments, and plenty of them. Mbappé has not been at his best in the past two games, but he showed against Morocco that in the blink of an eye he can beat two players with incredible skill and create a goal.

The first goal, cliched as it sounds, will be important on Sunday. France scored early against Morocco, putting their opponents on the back foot, and Argentina dominated after taking the lead against Croatia. It will be interesting to see the effect an opening goal has on the opposition and how they adapt their tactics. It suited France that Morocco were trying to get back into the game because it allowed them to counterattack with pace.

Both teams have shown they can be physical and that should make it a spicy final. I think the majority inside the stadium will be Argentinians, which could have an impact.

The France fans were outnumbered by Moroccans but their team coped with the pressure, which will be heightened on Sunday. France have the experience of winning a World Cup and have progressed through the quarter- and semi-finals despite not being at their best. That's what good teams do.

It is going to be a tight game, too close to call. But France and Argentina have players who can make something from almost nothing.

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Arsenal through despite Lyon loss but wait anxiously on Miedema injury

Suzanne Wrack



▲ Vivianne Miedema fires a shot at goal before sustaining an injury during the match against Lyon. Photograph: Ryan Pierse/Getty Images

Arsenal's progression to the quarter-finals of the Champions League was marred by a serious injury to the WSL record goalscorer, Vivianne Miedema. The Dutch forward, who has scored four goals in four games since returning from a coordinated rest between her national team and club, crumbled to the ground and left the pitch in tears on a stretcher, with her knee the culprit.

Arsenal are through to the knockout stage as second-place Lyon play third-place Juventus next week. The Gunners, meanwhile, can secure top spot with a win over Zurich as they have a better head-to-head goal difference over Lyon, who are level on 10 points with Arsenal going into the final round of games.

The Arsenal manager, Jonas Eidevall, said he did not know how severe Miedema's injury was. "I haven't spoken to her or the doctor and got an update," he said. "Right now, that takes a lot of my thoughts. I'm very concerned over that, of course, but we had to stay focused during the game and focus on our performance."

Eidevall had said it would be difficult to predict how Lyon would line up for this penultimate Champions League group game. The French champions were hampered by injuries in the reverse fixture at the Groupama Stadium, where Arsenal delivered a crushing 5-1 defeat of the eight-times winners. Here, their manager, Sonia Bompastor, welcomed back the defender Vanessa Gilles and the forward Delphine Cascarino to the starting XI, while the influential midfielder Dzsenifer Marozsán was among the substitutes. However, they were still without Sara Däbritz, Griedge Mbock, Catarina Macario, Ellie Carpenter and Ada Hegerberg.

The opening 45 minutes were dominated by the home team, who controlled possession but struggled in the final third. They mustered only one attempt, and even that single effort – a header from the centre-back Lotte Wubben-Moy – was off target.

Against the run of play Lyon took the lead at the close of the half. Selma Bacha's ball from just inside the halfway line towards Lindsey Horan was cleared but only as far as the former Gunner Daniëlle van de Donk. She headed down towards an offside Melvine Malard but the ball was deflected into the net by the Arsenal midfielder Frida Maanum.

It was a cruel blow on the stroke of half-time, and the pain was compounded by the injury to Miedema moments later, with the forward crumbling to the floor clutching her leg after stretching for the ball. She was eventually taken off on a stretcher while her teammate and partner, Beth Mead, who is out with an ACL injury, waited on crutches on the touchline.

In a half-time interview, Van de Donk expressed concern for her compatriot. "I feel very sad for her because you don't wish that on anyone," she said. "It doesn't look good, so my thoughts are with her."

Like Lyon, who suffered a 1-0 defeat to title rivals Paris Saint-Germain at the weekend, Arsenal have been limping towards the much-needed winter break. Somehow, their WSL and Champions League campaigns remain alive despite a number of injuries, with the Gunners three points behind league leaders Chelsea with a game in hand going into the break.

The momentum in the second half was firmly with the visiting side, buoyed by their goal and with Arsenal perhaps a little shocked by another big injury blow.

Eidevall disagreed: "After the game we are concerned, but we are professional. We don't let anything take away our focus from what we are doing. We stick to what we need to do on the pitch. After, we are concerned. During, we are 100% professional with what we have to do."



▲ Lyon celebrate after Frida Maanum's own goal gives them the lead. Photograph: Ryan Pierse/Getty Images

Rafaelle Souza replaced Miedema, shifting Leah Williamson into midfield with Maanum and Lia Wälti in a decidedly defensive move. The home team absorbed the pressure from Lyon well, limiting them to just one shot on target after the break. However, while Arsenal grew in confidence as the clock ticked into the final 10 minutes, they could not carve a way through the resolute backline of Lyon.

"I think we played well today, both in possession and out of possession," said Eidevall. "From a performance perspective I'm happy, from a results perspective I'm disappointed."

In the end, defeat doesn't matter, but losing Miedema really does.

Fernando Santos sacked by Portugal after World Cup quarter-final defeat

PA Media



▲ Fernando Santos led Portugal to victory at Euro 2016. Photograph: Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP/Getty Images

Portugal have parted company with manager Fernando Santos following their World Cup quarter-final defeat by Morocco.

Santos had been contracted until after Euro 2024, but the Portuguese Football Federation said now was the "right moment to start a new cycle". The 68-year-old took over in October 2014 and guided Portugal to success at Euro 2016 and then again in the inaugural 2019 Nations League campaign.

Despite losing to South Korea in their final Group H match in Qatar, Portugal had progressed as winners and thrashed Switzerland 6-1 in the last 16 when Santos dropped Cristiano Ronaldo from the starting line-up. Ronaldo again started on the bench for the quarter-final, with Morocco going on to secure a memorable 1-0 victory with a first-half header from Youssef En-Nesyri. Santos insisted he had no regrets about the decisions over Ronaldo, who was left in tears at the final whistle.

Portugal will now begin the process of appointing a new head coach, with the Roma manager, José Mourinho, one of the early favourites for the post. A statement from the Portuguese Football Federation read: "It was an honour to have a coach and a person like Fernando Santos at the head of the national team. The FPF thanks Fernando Santos and his technical team for the services provided over eight unique years and believes that this thanks is also made on behalf of the Portuguese people. The FPF board will now begin the process of choosing the next national coach."

Jonathan Morgan: 'Burnley brought me in on my merits rather than perception and biases'

Suzanne Wrack

Things are going well for Jonathan Morgan. His team, Burnley Women, are the only unbeaten side in the third and fourth tiers of women's football in the UK, having gone 16 games without losing since the start of the season.

It is also a strange time for Morgan, who spent seven years at Leicester, taking the women's team from the fourth tier to the Super League before being dismissed in November 2021. The sacking forced him to pause and consider his options, but also reflect on what had happened. It is fair to say he feels happy and appreciated at Burnley whereas that wasn't always the case at Leicester.

He describes a few everyday scenarios that, he feels, are the difference between the clubs and how they integrate the women's team. "Myself and the striker Courtney Willis were doing a one-to-one analysis session in the men's first team analysis room and the men's assistant coach, Craig Bellamy, walked in. You just think: 'Oh shoot, I gotta get out.'

"You automatically think there's a hierarchy, but he's just: 'How long are you going to be mate? Don't leave on my account, if you're going to be another half an hour I'll just go and get another room.' Then, he sat there and went through a couple of clips with me and Courtney. It was just class.

"Another time I was printing up some kit and the men's manager, Vincent Kompany, was in the kit room with me, just sat there chatting while I was doing it. It's these little moments that show you a club that's really truly together. I never ever had that feeling at Leicester and I don't think many clubs genuinely have that feeling."

What made the exit from Leicester harder was that so many of his family were or had been part of the side's rise. His sister Holly was captain and their father, Rohan, used to be the chairman. Jonathan's other sister Jade is, as general manager, the only remaining Morgan at the club.

The fear for Leicester was perhaps the nepotistic image the Morgan involvement gave, but as a family the Morgans invested heavily in the building of the club from the bottom up, both financially and time-wise. Morgan and his father's business financed Leicester all the way up to the Championship-winning season.

"We're talking about hundreds of thousands of pounds over those years. If you look around now you see a wealth of players that came through our club and are doing well in other clubs in the Midlands. We've probably held up the Midlands from a player pathway point of view. We were just a family club," says Morgan.

"When I first started we had nothing, it was nothing. I always heard what people thought: 'He got there because his dad took over', that type of thing.

"It is true, my dad gave me the opportunity originally. But he didn't do the coaching, he didn't do the tactics, he didn't go through badges and get the licences. So that hurt.

"Holly as a player got it, too: 'She's

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only captain because of her brother.' No one really took into consideration how that affected us. We just had to smile and put on a strong face because that was just the position we were in."

After all the success, things changed, Morgan feels, when Leicester took full control of the women's team in 2020, just after they had won promotion to the Super League. Morgan was sacked after eight winless games at the start of the 2021-22 season and he has the feeling that his family's presence was "a ticking timebomb from the moment that Leicester took over".

Being forced out was hard. "It was a horrible time," he says. "We're all clever enough to know when you're wanted somewhere and when you're not wanted. Even during the Championship season, it was very, very difficult. Without going into too much detail, we had little targets set for our first year in the WSL that were really unattainable. You start wondering why they are setting unattainable targets and you start wondering why you are not getting the players you want and why no one is fighting your corner."



▲ Burnley manager Jonathan Morgan. Photograph: Plumb Images/Leicester City FC/Getty Images

That meant when the sacking came "it wasn't as hard as it maybe would be otherwise". Morgan wasn't sure whether he wanted to go back into football. He has a masters in quantity surveying and still runs his housing business, so in a way doesn't need football but says he was disappointed at the lack of support from the FA and lack of interest from other clubs after his dismissal, particularly as one of the few black managers in the women's game.

"A lot of [the talk about support for black and ethnic minority managers] is lip service," he says. "I don't really talk too much about it because it's such a polarising topic and people just either support you or they just go straight against you when you talk about it. All I can say is that I don't think in any way, shape or form over the years I've had any real support from any of the governing bodies.

"It feels very, very easy to move on a manager from an ethnic minority or of colour and you don't really see them come back in straight away. I barely get approached, if ever. Burnley was probably the first club to properly approach me and say: 'We want you.' I don't think there's enough support out there."

Morgan has stepped out of the family shadow and he feels it is a refreshing change. "One of the things I love about Burnley is that they brought me in on my merits, rather than what people said or what people think about me," he says. "Hopefully, so far, they've seen the success in that, we're the only team in the league that hasn't lost yet."

His time at Burnley has helped relight the fire. "One thing I needed to find out was whether I loved being in football because I was with Jade, Holly and my dad. Was that my pull? Was that my reason? It really was a strong one. Everything I did, I always had to think about the effect on them too.



▲ Jonathan Morgan spent seven years at Leicester, taking the women's team from the fourth tier to the Super League. Photograph: Plumb Images/Leicester City FC/Getty Images

"At Burnley I can be more focused on myself and the team and not the wider impact my decisions could have. It's nice to be able to be Jonathan rather than the Morgan family or the Morgan dynasty."

Transfer latest: Chelsea close on Molde's Fofana as Madrid land €60m Endrick

Fabrizio Romano

Chelsea are poised to sign the striker David Datro Fofana from Molde in January for more than €10m (£8.7m). The Ivory Coast international, who will be 20 next week, has been with the Norwegian club since last year.

An agreement is in place for the transfer and it is due to be sealed once personal terms have been settled with Fofana, who has scored 17 goals and provided six assists in 29 matches for Molde this season.

Fofana was a target for several clubs, prompting Chelsea to move swiftly. It continues their policy of signing young talent, as seen with summer moves for Carney Chukwuemeka, Cesare Casadei, Gabriel Slonina and Omari Hutchinson.

The pursuit of Fofana for does not affect their plans to bring in the forward Christopher Nkunku from RB Leipzig next summer.



▲ David Datro Fofana celebrates after scoring for Molde against Hoffenheim. Photograph: DeFodi Images/Getty Images

Real Madrid have secured a €60m deal for the 16-year-old Brazilian Endrick to join from Palmeiras in July 2024, when he turns 18. Madrid are paying an initial €35m and up to €25m in add-ons – plus €12m in taxes – for the striker, who will have a contract to 2027 with an option for a further three years.

Endrick became the youngest player to feature in a senior game for Palmeiras at 16 years, two months and 15 days. "Endrick will continue his training at Palmeiras," Madrid said. "The player will travel to Madrid in the coming days to visit the facilities of our club."

Cristiano Ronaldo trained at Madrid's Valdebebas centre on Thursday on a separate pitch from those used by club teams. He is without a club after leaving Manchester United last month.

Oli McBurnie cleared of stamping on pitch-invading Nottingham Forest fan

PA Media

The Sheffield United striker Oli McBurnie has been cleared of stamping on a pitch-invading fan after claiming he hopped over him to protect his injured foot. The 26-year-old Scotland international was acquitted of assaulting Nottingham Forest supporter George Brinkley, after the player's barrister said McBurnie had been "like a ballerina" in avoiding contact.

Prosecutors had alleged McBurnie was angry and in a "red mist" after his side has lost on penalties to Forest in May's Championship playoff semi-final at the City Ground.



▲ Oli McBurnie arrives at Nottingham magistrates court where he was cleared of assault by beating. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Finding McBurnie not guilty of a single charge of assault by beating, the district judge Leo Pyle said his judgment was based on evidence heard in court and "not the instant judgment of social media". In his ruling, tPyle said some of the evidence given by Brinkley had been "somewhat flimsy".

The district judge had been urged by McBurnie's barrister to find that "a degree of club bias" was responsible for accounts given by witnesses to the incident. In her closing speech to the court, the defence lawyer, Lisa Judge, submitted that the complainant in the case had lied about the incident and shown malice by sending an abusive Instagram message wishing death on McBurnie and his family.

Judge, referring to a video screenshot the prosecution claimed showed the 6ft 2in McBurnie looking angry on the pitch, said the player may have a "stern resting face".

The lawyer added: "The prosecution opened this case on that boot following through into a stamp. It's quite clear that boot lifted up like a ballerina, trying to clear the legs of Mr Brinkley [who was] clutching his bottle and his programme, lying on the floor of a pitch he should not have been on."